

# UNIT 9 AGRARIAN AND LAND RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

## Structure

- 9.1 Introduction
- 9.2 Agrarian Structure
  - 9.2.1 Colonial period
  - 9.2.2 Changing Trends
- 9.3 Agrarian Reform
  - 9.3.1 Structural
  - 9.3.2 Liberal
- 9.4 Peasant and Land Rights Movements
  - 9.4.1 Emiliano Zapata's Movement in Mexico
  - 9.4.2 Movimento Sem Terra (MST)
- 9.5 Summary
- 9.6 Exercises

---

## 9.1 INTRODUCTION

---

Agrarian and land rights movements in Latin America date back to colonial times. Peasant movements began with indigenous uprisings and slave rebellions during the colonial period. Yet, decolonisation has not caused any loss of momentum to these movements. Traditional inequitable agrarian structures, lack of concerted initiatives in respect of just land reforms abetted further by the process of economic liberalisation and globalisation are the basic causes of discontent among the rural poor today.

These movements have taken many forms, ranging between extremes of social banditry to violent peasant revolution. While some countries have taken action to ensure rights to the peasant movements, in most countries it has been a mere formal exercise with no practical positive impact. Examples of such movements are aplenty. Mention may be made of the Emiliano Zapata movement in Mexico, which had agrarian reform as its principal objective, the *Movimento Sem Terra* (MST) of Brazil and the politically motivated rural violence in Colombia all of which has taken a toll of human lives.

This unit analyses the growing movements across Latin America of the landless and the rural poor. In this process, we will study the traditional agrarian structure in Latin America, get an overview of the land reforms that have been attempted and also try and understand why these movements are on the rise today.

---

## 9.2 AGRARIAN STRUCTURES

---

Agrarian structure implies a set of institutions or norms governing access to the use of land as a productive resource. In Latin American countries the land structure is deeply rooted in their Spanish or Portuguese colonial history and has evolved over several hundred years.

Elaborate agrarian structures in the form of basic communal tenure existed even before the colonial period such as those of the *Aztecs* in Meso America and *Incas* in the Andes. Communal land tenure was the basic form of agrarian structure (and has survived to the present day in a modified form). But land was periodically divided among its members and tilled on a family basis. Besides this cultivable land, there were common lands to which everybody in the group had indiscriminate access. These forms of basic communal tenure existed along with lands possessed by a king or emperor and common peasants tilled these plots as service to their king, or the nobility in pre-hispanic society.

### 9.2.1 Colonial Structures

The conquest of the Americas was carried out in the name of the Crown but it was actually a series of private undertakings subscribed to by important mercantile interests with the participation of the state. It was only later, once the military conquest was established, that the Crown took an active role in the governance of the empire. It is then that the Crown developed an agrarian policy. The considerations were:

1. *Compensation for soldiers who took part in the conquest.* A system of land grants was set up (*haciendas, estancias*). *Encomiendas*, where the conquerors had rights to extract tributes and services from native peasants without taking over land was also introduced. This was an attempt to maintain local elements of the indigenous social structure and seek acculturation and social control through Christian indoctrination. In the late 16th Century, reforms were carried out whereby *de facto* control and possession of lands in the *encomienda* could be transformed into private property. *Resguardos* or lands set aside for subsistence of the indigenous population remained Crown property. '*Repartimiento*' was labour ascribed to the indigenous population of the *resguardos*.
2. *Organisation of tropical and sub-tropical plantations (later joined by other export crops).* Over the years Latin America went through a series of economic cycles producing a series of marketable crops like sugarcane, cacao, coffee, cotton, bananas and wheat in different countries. Most of these products came from plantations/*haciendas* requiring a constant supply of labour. After failure of attempts to enslave the native indigenous population, alternatives like importation of African slave labour for work on tropical plantations became the basis for the agricultural economies of the coastal areas. It was abolished only in the early 19th Century in most countries.

Plantation crops were confined to certain areas and had greater importance in the islands and coasts of Caribbean, northeast and east coast of Brazil and on the Peruvian coast than in the South American hinterland. The problem of transport of agricultural goods to ports was a disincentive for the interiors.

3. *Provision for adequate food supplies to the mining and urban centres.* Latin America has one of the highest rates of population growth and a high rate of urbanisation implying a demand for increasing food production made on a declining proportion of the population.

There was a tussle between the landowning aristocracy and the Spanish administration on agrarian matters. The Crown attempted to curb the powers of the landed class (*hacendados*) by furthering

the rural settlement of the small freehold Spanish agriculturalists as also the indigenous communities, but was not very successful in doing so. In this societal structure, dominated by the *latifundia*, practically everyone is dependent on the landholder including public officials.

By the mid-19th Century, the largest single landowner was the Church and though the *bourgeoisie* of the period tried to let that land on the free market, it simply resulted in the concentration of land in private hands instead of leading to the rise of a rural middle class. What ultimately became rooted in the agrarian structure of Latin America was peonage with variations for different regions. In Brazil, for example, slavery played a more important part in the development of the country and has been marked by massive European (Portuguese, German, Italian) and Japanese agriculturalists. In countries such as Argentina and Uruguay, an extensive cattle economy with reduced labour requirements made way for a different situation.

### 9.2.2 Changing Trends

Development of technology is undoubtedly essential to bring about reform: there were two contrasting elements apparent in Latin America. On one hand, there was the favourable soil, labour and transport conditions where modern capitalist enterprise has moved into the fields to establish well-mechanised units of production and supplied the increasing urban demands in the market for sugar, cotton, rice, sesame, meat and dairy products, achieving high productivity. But on the other hand there was hardly any evidence of small holders, tenants and service tenants showing any development. Thus, on the whole and in most of the countries in Latin America, there was not a sufficient improvement in the agricultural sector to meet the growing demands for food. This is largely on account of the persistence of the traditional agricultural structures.

It is commonly accepted that traditional Latin American agricultural structure consists of large *latifundia*, which has most of the land, and a farm population, which survives on the *minifundia* (land units which are too small to enable a family to obtain an income). Even when the *minifundias* are not included physically within the large estates, many *minifundia* operators depend upon them for part-time employment.

Land is the main source of wealth in a traditional rural economy. But both the *latifundia* and *minifundia* use the resources wastefully—on the smaller land areas there is overuse of the land with intense cultivation because the primary aim of the users of this land is to survive. On the large estates too the technology, capital investments and management are at rudimentary levels, so much so their production levels are determined by the labour used. This is because the landowner, in order to retain his economic power, maintains the peasants or *campesinos* in a situation of low incomes and insecure tenancy. Thus these tenurial institutions are obstacles to economic and social development maintaining and legitimising existing inequalities. This is carried on to the extent that they impede full and efficient use of land, the labour force and economic productivity.

Thus there have been attempts at changes and technological innovations in agriculture, but they have not been able to substantially alter the traditional characteristics of the system. The main manifestations of agrarian heritage are—the *latifundia-minifundia* pattern of landholdings, a rural class society divided into masters and quasi-serfs, forms of peonage, onerous tenancy, insecurity and lack of mobility. Poverty coexists with a concentration of wealth and relative abundance of natural resources. This inequality is causing the land tenure system to be blamed as one of the main obstacles to development in Latin America.

---

## 9.3 AGRARIAN REFORM

---

At the heart of the land reform problem in most Latin American countries is the unsatisfactory land tenure situation—semi-feudal or *seigniorial* agrarian structure inherited from colonial times. The principal thrust of any agrarian reform is the redistribution of land resources. Agrarian reform is not a question of reforming an outdated agrarian structure but of carrying forward an agrarian policy, which addresses the requirements of a country for social and economic development and solves the problems produced by a new land structure. Mere distribution of land is not an answer for all problems but the question is one of reforming land structures, which takes into account an adequate agricultural development policy of a country. Agrarian reform has taken a dramatic turn in recent decades. The original land reforms of the 1930s under Cardenas in Mexico, to the Sandinista reforms in Nicaragua in the 1980s sought state organised redistribution of land resources. This was the structuralist perspective in which the state had an important role. The more recent reforms are more liberal in nature and the redistribution of land resources is more market-oriented.

The first agrarian reform in Latin America took place in Mexico after the revolution of 1910. Guatemala carried out reforms in 1944 (which was undone by 1954), and in Bolivia these reforms were followed by the 1952 revolution. Land reform began in earnest in Latin America in the late 1950s with the Cuban revolution. While land reforms before the Cuban revolution had been easily done away with, the political repercussions of the Cuban revolution had the effect of everyone looking at peasant movements and the masses in a new light. A fearful United States convinced most of the Latin American countries to encourage programmes of comprehensive agrarian reforms leading to the transformation of unjust structures and land tenure systems. The aim was to replace the traditional *latifundia* and smallholdings by an equitable of land tenure and use so that land would provide economic stability for the person who works it and become “the guarantee of his freedom and dignity” (Charter of Punta Del Este). It resulted in a series of land reform laws, organisation of land reform institutes and planning of projects to give land to farm people with insufficient amount of land. It became a formalised programme of national governments with a goal to change the power structure in agriculture and allied sectors and make a substantial improvement in the welfare of the peasantry.

According to the Inter-American Economic and Social Council effective structural changes must be brought about by agrarian reform and is a fundamental requisite for development for the area concerned. For this the change in structure of land tenure should increase the income of the farmer, prevent land and the income it generates from becoming a source of speculation and economic domination, modernise rural life by incorporating the farmer into the national economy and improve the power structure by giving the farmer a real voice in decisions and a share in political, economic and social opportunities.

How far has this reform movement been successful in Latin America? The efforts made were on the whole insufficient to achieve the above stated objectives of land reform. The results fell far short of the ideal—inequality in the distribution of land and wealth, low standards of living for the rural population and new forms of peasant subordination. A bundle of policies, practices were designed to undo these reforms or make it impossible to carry them out. This is known as the counter reform. It was not a movement, nor a formalised programme like that of agrarian reform. It was a policy but never a programme, nor was it ever formal. It had its agents, but no agencies

and was diffused and anonymous. Counter reform sought to maintain *status quo* while agrarian reform sought to destroy the old order and construct a new one. Thus counter reform was a defence mechanism on the part of the power elite that felt threatened in the exercise of its privilege. This was done very effectively through land legislations. Such legislative measures were burdened with lengthy provisions with exceptions to the stated objectives couched in legal phrases with many interpretations. These legislations became very difficult to implement. Most of these land reforms were claimed to be beneficial to the *campesinos* but the peasantry were not represented in the parliament and did not seek the cooperation of *campesinos* or their organisations.

### 9.3.1 Structural Reforms

The structural perspective in Latin America saw agricultural performance and income distribution as inseparable from land ownership distribution. Thus they sought state-mandated redistribution to break the colonial dualistic agrarian structure inherited by most Latin American countries. While these reforms aimed to solve the problems of an uneven land tenancy system, they, in reality, functioned as an incentive to capitalist development.

The focus of analysis of the agrarian structure has been changing in Latin America. The transformation of demands for agrarian products, the modernising policies of the state with the introduction of new technology and the rapid growth of wage labour—all point towards the expansion of capitalism in the countryside. This expansion was related to the transformation of traditional landlords but a new rural *bourgeoisie* emerged. Most of the radical agrarian reform consolidated a state capitalist structure.

These reforms failed to raise agricultural productivity because large sectors of landless and land-poor rural households were excluded from the redistribution process; collective forms of tenure imposed from above by the federal governments created incentive problems associated with effort and investment, and individual poor farmers were unable to introduce new technology and the crop of their choice which would have raised productivity and income.

### 9.3.2 Liberal Reforms

Several Latin American countries adopted the new liberal reforms in the 1990s. These sought to redress the flaws of the earlier reform policies by strengthening individual private property rights over land and replacing the state with markets as the main mechanism for allocating agricultural land and capital. This was in contrast to the structural reforms and it was suggested that markets could weaken the links between ownership structure, land access and agricultural performance. This potential separation of performance from structure is termed as a neo-structural perspective. And it suggests that in order to get better agricultural performance or a rise in agricultural productivity, other flaws in factor markets are to be addressed.

---

## 9.4 PEASANT AND LAND RIGHTS MOVEMENTS

---

When we discuss ‘land rights’ movements, they need not necessarily be a movement of the peasantry. The indigenous peoples’ movements in Latin America are a major force to reckon with. This movement is a movement for rights—political, social, economic and cultural. Land becomes important for them as all the rights of the indigenous peoples revolve around the question of land or more importantly, territory. While quite a few problems of the peasantry are similar to those of the indigenous peoples, their issues need to be dealt with in a different perspective, as

their demands are quite different. In this unit, we are concentrating on the issues involved in dealing with the peasant and agrarian movements alone.

Anthropologist Holmberg calls the exercise of overt or covert repression of the peasantry in the *hacienda* system as the 'culture of repression'. Rodolfo Stavenhagen calls the situation in which the peasantry lives both in the *haciendas* and as free peasants as 'internal colonialism'. This is so not only because of the existing unjust land structure but also on account of the expansion of capitalism during the second half of the 19th Century accompanied by economic liberalism

The peasantry thus has lived under the threat of violence and constant fear. Peasant resistance in the past has been crushed, at times violently. Peasants have been seen as an obstacle to development because of their resistance to change. This is related to the fact that they have lived under the 'culture of repression'. Apart from the resistance of the peasantry to the culture of repression, there are other developments in recent years that have been responsible for the peasant protest movements such as increasing awareness among the peasantry, the emergence of strong and charismatic leadership and the support the peasant movements have gained from the marginalised urban segments. The kind of demands made and the means by which pressure is applied by the peasants is no less important. Peasants have been seen to rely more and more on radical approaches including civil disobedience and even violence to reach their goal.

Here, we take two such instances of land rights movements.

#### **9.4.1 Emiliano Zapata's Movement in Mexico**

The Mexican Revolution of 1910-1920 headed by Emiliano Zapata gave stimulus to the agrarian reform legislations in Mexico. The revolution was a struggle against the *hacendados* of the surrounding *haciendas* who had taken over the community lands of the villages and forced the villagers to work on their fields. To begin with, Zapata initiated recovery of lands by taking away the fences, which had been illegally put up by the *hacendados*.

Francisco Madero initiated the first activities of a national revolt in the north of Mexico supported by peasant groups against re-election of the dictatorial Porfirio Diaz to presidency. The *Plan de San Luis Potosi*, the basic declaration of the opposition against Porfirio Diaz mentioned that all the lands taken away from the people by force would have to be returned. Zapata joined forces with Madero to overthrow Porfirio Diaz, in the hope of land reforms being carried out. When this did not come about, Zapata rose in armed rebellion. He took up arms late in 1910, with the cry of land and liberty. His army was made of armed peasants recruited from plantations and villages. He began to seize the land by force. Zapata supported Madero until he realised that land reform was no longer a concern of the latter. Then he formulated his own agrarian programme. This programme, outlined in the *Plan de Ayala* (November 22, 1911), called for the return of the land to the indigenous people.

According to *Plan de Ayala* the people should claim immediate possession of land that they had been illegally deprived of and to which they could still show title. Those who had difficulty would receive land through expropriation, after indemnification had been paid for one-third of all the hacienda lands. Those *hacendados* who opposed this move, would have their lands nationalised.

In defence of his plan, Zapata held the field against successive federal governments. The peasants

rallied to Zapata's support, and by the end of 1911 he controlled most of Morelos; later he enlarged his power to cover Guerrero, Oaxaca, Puebla, and at times even the Federal District. Zapata's forces occupied Mexico City three times in 1914-15. When negotiations about agrarian reform failed with one of the generals, Zapata started to apply *Plan de Ayala* with speed in 1914. Taking official notice of the importance of agrarian reforms, the government issued a decree in 1914.

#### 9.4.2 Movimento Sem Terra (MST)

The most striking of the peasant movements of Latin America in recent times is certainly the *Movimento Sem Terra* (MST) or the landless peasants' movement, which originated in Brazil and is now spreading fast across the continent. Through forcible occupation and cultivation of vast areas of land and by taking over offices of the land reforms in various Latin American nations, the MST has been able to involve hundreds of thousands of families of the rural poor.

The MST is not a political party, but the fact remains that it carries a lot of political weight. What are its objectives? Obviously, the prime objective is to obtain land and to redistribute the land among the rural poor. The MST supports the creation of large areas of collective settlements (*assentamentos*). It calls for an early implementation of cooperative principles as a prelude to collectivisation, leaving the *modus operandi* to the people of the concerned province and locality. It also calls for a change in the existing and exploitative social order and underlines the need for 'participatory democracy of the people.'

The weakness of the MST lies in its somewhat loose and disorganised structure. However, the alternate health and education, and environmental frameworks that the MST calls for, shows that its policies do have a great deal of potentiality as an alternative to the neo-liberal prescription.

Recently, the MST movement has spread across large parts of Latin America. In Bolivia, the *campesinos*, according to reports, have appropriated thousands of acres of land. The movement started when President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada failed to live up to his promise that he would redistribute, in a year's time, 500,000 hectares of ceiling-surplus land among the landless and the rural poor. After the MST has forcibly occupied the vast Collana estate (some 80 km from capital La Paz), the MST leader, Angel Durán has declared that at least 1300 of the 1800 hectares of land should be redistributed to the *campesinos*.

MST movement in Bolivia is strongly linked to the nation's indigenous communities, the *Quechuas* and the *Ayemaras*, who are demanding some 22 million hectares as this was the figure that was arrived as part of the compromise between the government and the MST some years ago. The MST in Bolivia is rapidly moving towards a violent confrontation with the government and the upper echelons of the rural élite.

In Brazil, the MST is getting impatient for a change under the present President Luiz Inacio 'Lula' da Silva. To press for demands that include the handing over of several million hectares of farmland and the resettlement of two million landless people, the MST has started to occupy private landed estates and has commenced organising rural strikes and roadblocks or *piqueteros* in north and central Brazil.

With less than 4 per cent of the landed elements occupying 78 per cent of the farmlands in Brazil (as, indeed in most of the Latin American nations), the MST has called for change, and early. In

the meanwhile, as we file this report, news comes from the Prensa Latina that the MST has occupied more than 100 estates and is poised to occupy 50 more in the weeks to come. Recently 'Lula' has asked the MST to be patient and has, at the same time, somewhat placated the powerful farmers' lobby by saying that land reforms would be put in place but not at the high speed demanded by the MST leader Gilmar Mauro.

The MST is increasingly losing patience and its leader, Mauro has issued a notice stating that even if it comes to organising armed conflict, the MST would go ahead with its plans of rapid occupation of the large landed estates of Brazil. The arrest of several leaders of the MST in Teodoro Sampaio, Sao Paulo estate has further inflamed the sentiments of the MST. The FARC of Columbia has recently issued a statement saying that it would support the MST and be the peasantry's 'armed wing' in Latin America, if necessary.

In recent weeks, the MST has started a vigorous and militant struggle for land in other Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Uruguay, and Ecuador. The movement is spreading fast across Latin America and according to the MST leadership, the continent would soon be sitting on a powder keg of rural discontent.

---

## 9.5 SUMMARY

---

In order to study and understand agrarian movements in Latin America, it is essential to first take a look at the land structure and institutions that have been in place since colonisation. A system of land grants was set up in order to compensate the soldiers for carrying on the conquest (*hacienda/encomienda* system). The Church was one of the largest owners of land. This traditional agrarian heritage and its manifestations are at the heart of the problem in most Latin American countries. While agrarian reform has been on the agenda, a mere distribution of land is not an answer for all problems but the question is the land reform which takes into account an adequate agricultural development policy of a country. Effective structural changes must be brought about by agrarian reform. Land reforms of the 1930s under Cardenas in Mexico, to the Sandinista reforms in Nicaragua in the 1980s sought state organised redistribution of land resources. This was the structuralist perspective in which the state had an important role. The more recent reforms are more liberal in nature and the redistribution of land resources is more market-oriented.

---

## 9.6 EXERCISES

---

1. Describe the traditional colonial agrarian land structure in Latin America.
2. Can you say that the agricultural reforms carried out in Latin America have been successful? Why?
3. What, in your opinion, are the failings of the neo-liberal land reforms?
4. Give a brief account of the reasons for peasant mobilisation and movement taking one example of the peasant movements in Latin America.