



ISSN Print: 2394-7500
ISSN Online: 2394-5869
Impact Factor: 5.2
IJAR 2018; 4(8): 192-198
www.allresearchjournal.com
Received: 20-06-2018
Accepted: 26-07-2018

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Land reforms in India: A historical aspect

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Abstract

India being an agriculture state, it has long history of peasants' exploitation by the zamindars. They have to face the wrath in all the contemporary reign or governments in India. In the ancient India, they were having different form of revenue assessment than that of Mughals as well as British raj which was disastrous for the cultivators. During 1857 mutiny peasants joined with the armies against British government. After that British government realized some relaxation must be given to peasants. The movement kept escalating after wards to get freedom from the zamindars which were organized comprehensively. After independence more efficient measures tried by the government to implement land reforms in all the states. For that particular purpose provisions incorporated in the Constitution of India. The first five year plan made special recommendations regarding implementation of the land reforms in India. Unfortunately, except a number of states land reform not achieved its desired success. Even then states have been taking some innovative steps to implement land reforms in different way. So that maximum benefit must be provided to the cultivators.

Keywords: Human existence, agriculture, revenue system, zamindars, harassment, land reforms and land reform policy

Introduction

The land has been considered as basic natural resource for human existence since long. In primitive times, man had drawn most of his sustenance as much as he could from land. Not to surprise, the utilization of land is equally important for men even in the current time ^[1]. The use of land for agricultural purpose was great discovery of human civilization. Growth of civilization and dependency on earth was the great burden and challenge for survival of human being. At present, over half of the world inhabitants relying on agriculture for its subsistence. Agriculture absorbs about 70 percent of the labour force in India and in some of the developing countries the figure is over 90 percent ^[2]. In India, large segment of population which is approximately 55 percent depends on the agriculture ^[3]. In that course, the peasants, intermediaries and the State (or King) came into existence with time; the intermediaries were appointed to collect land revenue ^[4].

Legal concept of land

Legally, land includes all houses and other buildings standing or built on it. Land is also an area of ground with defined boundaries, including minerals or resources below the surface and anything growing on or attached to the surface ^[5]. The special objectives of the Punjab Land Reforms Act, 1972 ^[6] leads legislature to provide a separate definition of the word land. In the year 1946, All India Kisan Sabha demanded a maximum limit of land ownership of 25 acres per landholder. Economic Program committee chaired by Pt. Jawahar Lal Nehru, proposed, 'the maximum size of holdings must have been determined. The land in excess of permissible limit acquired must be vested and utilized by village panchayat'. In 1949, the Agrarian Reforms committee, chaired by J.C. Kumarappa recommended a ceiling on landholding which was to be three times the size of an economic holding i.e. which would give a rational standard of livelihood to the peasant and assuring full employment to family of standard size.

With the First Five Year Plan 1951-56, it was resolved that there should be an upper limit of amount of land an individual could hold. Exact upper limit was to be fixed by each state, having regard to its own agrarian history and problems. It further decided that state governments should take immediate action for fixing of ceilings on land ownership, with a

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view to distribute the land. In order to implement measures, legislature in Punjab passed two Acts ^[7] with respect to ceiling on the land.

Agriculture and land arrangement in ancient India

The origin of agriculture could be traced to early human attempts settling down in agreeable environments and gradually exploiting resources which were found easily accessible ^[8]. In the course of time, humans gained practical knowledge of their growth characteristics, factors favorable for their fostering as well as reproduction. When humans got assured of an enough supply of products, some of which they could store for a reasonable period, they started to settle at particular place indulging in plant domestication on very small scales. The Vedic people had given great importance to agriculture. Similar ideas are also mentioned in *Athervaveda*. Vedic time agriculture was regarded as noble occupation ^[9].

In the ancient times, we found 12 types ^[10] of land depending on fertility of the soil, irrigation and physical characteristics ^[11]. In ancient India, land revenue system was based on the productivity and type of soil. The *Arthashastra* ^[12] provides that the high ground and lowlands should have been recorded differently. Revenue rates were 1/10th as per *Kautilya* primarily, but later it was mentioned regarding two type of taxes viz. *Bali* and *Shudbhaga* which fixed at the rate of 1/6th. *Megasthenes* has also acknowledged that *Maurya* officers were likely concerned for the assessment and consideration of alluvial deposits for revenue ^[13]. The village panchayat had large powers, both executive and judicial. Land was too distributed by this panchayat, which also collected taxes out of produce and paid government's share on behalf of village ^[14]. It has been observed that, in ancient India, the system of revenue assessment was based on the method of analysis and demarcation of soil according to its yield.

Agricultural and land reformative measures in Mughal period

The study of agrarian system in Mughal India also presents a different picture of land relation and revenue system. In the Mughal period, land revenue system was based not only on the types and quality of land but it also based on the area for agriculture held by farmers. Renowned historian *Irfan Habib* in his book ^[15] mentions, "Raja Toddar Mall played an important role formulating the revenue system in Mughal administration. He measured the land primarily for assessing the revenue on it". It is obvious that while the land actually cropped can precisely be determined. The word "cultivable" is open to many definitions, and it is difficult to say whether Mughals and modern (British-Indian) statistician used the same criteria, if indeed, either of them used uniform criteria at all. The *Ain-i-Akbari* provides revenue rates for sixteen crops of the *rabi* harvest cultivated in all revenue circles for Agra province, and for twenty-five crops of the *kharif* harvest, cultivated in all circles of the province ^[16].

As already mentioned, the central attribute of the agrarian array under Mughals was the separation from peasant of his surplus produce as land revenue being major source of state exchequer. Succeeding studies of Mughal India have shown that it was a tax on crops and different from land revenue as conceived by the British ^[17]. Observations made by some of foreign traveler visiting India in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries holding unanimously to the view that

the king was the owner of soil. The British officials took that doctrine as an excuse, to maintain that, the East India Company had inherited a universal right of ownership over land from its predecessors ^[18].

There was, most important of all, the question of rights and status of peasants themselves. The condition of peasants generally approximated to the lowest possible levels of subsistence. The central feature of agrarian system of Mughal India was to transfer from peasant of his surplus produces largely by way of exaction of land revenue. That means peasants cannot earn more than their mere subsistence. Peasants were left to bear practically all the risks from the inconsistency of harvests. Position of peasants in Mughal period in relation to land offers a sharp contrast to that of his descendant living under modern landlordism created under the British rule. The great weapon in hands of the landlord has been the threat of evicting his tenantry ^[19].

Zamindari system in India

Much controversy has centered on the question whether it is wholly a creation of British rule. Generally accepted view seemed to be that the zamindar in Mughal time was really a "vassal chief" and could not exist in directly administered territories of the empire. *Firuz Shah Tughluq* in 1353 speaks of zamindars as comprising "headmen, government appointed land-holders and landowners" ^[20]. The word zamindar still continued to be applied in Mughal period to chiefs in general. Zamindars served as an agency to the state for collection of revenue and exercised significant authority in governmental and social affairs. Zamindars were very influential class and could have been found in entire Mughal Empire. Hereditary succession to zamindari was the general rule ^[21].

In Mughal times estimation was incoherently made for *kharif* and *rabi* crops. After the evaluation an agreement called *patta*, or *qaul-e-qarar* was signed mentioning rate of revenue demand. The cultivators were supposed to give *qabuliyat* (acceptance) in return imposed on him, stating time and mode of payments' ^[22]. In Mughal period crop sharing was considered the best method of revenue measurement and compilation. By this system the state and cultivators shared the risk of seasons jointly. Two types of methods are as follows:

- 1) **Dambandi/Kankut:** The term *kankut* is formed of two words *kan* and *kat*. The word *kan* refers to grain and *kat* represent to estimate. Similarly, *dam* stands for grain and *bandi* refers to determining anything. This was the system where grain yield and production was predicted. In *kankut*, firstly, the field was calculated by official tools. Then, as per productivity of *bigha* wise, average and Bad Lands were anticipated and revenue was fixed accordingly.
- 2) **Zabti:** It was the vital method of assessment in Mughal time. Sher Shah Suri was responsible to develop this method of assessment. In Akbar's reign, the system was revised for many times before it took to the final shape.

Agriculture and condition of farmers in state of Punjab

The conquests of Sikhs and fixed colonies of the Sikh people covered the vassal principalities in the hills, the former Mughal provinces of Lahore and Kashmir, more than half of Multan, nearly a third of Delhi and a considerable part of the province of Kabul. During the period of Sikh rule

most of the area covered by the principalities of vassal chiefs in hills remained outside the direct control of Sikh rulers. Over the trans-Indus territories, Sikh rule lasted for only fifteen to twenty years. Only the province of Lahore did the sovereign Sikh rule last for nearly half a century to ninety years^[23].

Belonging to the peasantry class, Sardars of Punjab acknowledged the importance to agriculture and agricultural activities in their respective areas. So, they decided to revive the prosperity of peasants and development of the agriculture. A state of high cultivation in Sikh territories and the rent was moderate generally collected in kind and during any disputes the cultivator was never molested^[24]. The method used for the assessment and collection of land revenue was similar to Mughals. Taking into account the whole of Punjab, it appears that the system of *zabt* was most prevalent for the assessment and collection of land revenue followed by *batai* and *kankut*. In the case of *kankut* collection of revenue was generally made in cash, and in case of *batai* the share of government could be sold on the spot. Rates of the assessment for *kankut* and *batai* were generally one-half and rates in the case of *zabt* were about 40 percent of the estimated yield^[25]. In the areas of the Sikh ascendancy, it seems that the methods adopted to determine land revenue were simple and unscientific and every care was taken to protect the interest of peasants^[26].

Land reorganization and position of peasants in British period

It is worth looking into the effects of colonial exploitation of Indian peasants. British economic policies and the new land revenue arrangements distorted the agrarian structure and ruined the peasantry. Condition of peasants very dejected during the colonial era. It is a well-recognized fact that India remained principally an agricultural state. The overwhelming majority of the population depends on agriculture. In the cosmic zamindari areas, peasants were left on the mercy of zamindars that rack-rented them and forced them to pay the illegal dues.

In ryotwari areas, the government itself levied significant land revenue. This obligated the peasants to have a loan from the moneylenders that leads their land to go in the hands of landlords^[27]. The British policies revolved around getting maximum income from land without caring much about the interests of the cultivators. They abandoned the age-old system of revenue administration and adopted in their place a ruthless policy of revenue collection, to that end, the British principally adopted three types of land tenures. Some of the areas^[28] of colonial state were brought under zamindari system or the Permanent Settlement. The second revenue system, called mahalwari settlement, was introduced in about 30 percent area^[29] of British Raj. The ryotwari system covered about 51 percent of the area under Raj comprising parts of the Bombay and Madras Presidencies, Assam and certain other parts of British India.

Zamindari system in British period

Zamindari system was introduced by Cornwallis in 1793 by the Permanent Settlement Act in Bengal, Bihar, Orissa and Varanasi. Before this, the East India Company got the rights of Diwani to control the revenues of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa. In the beginning, they carried on with the old system of revenue collection. In 1773, Warren Hastings auctioned the right to collect revenue to the highest bidders. But he

failed in that experiment. Nevertheless, the amount of revenue put to the highest rates by zamindars, the actual assessment remained different year to year. This caused volatility in the Company's revenue collection. That was the point when the thought emerged for fixing the land revenue at permanent basis^[30]. In that system the zamindars recognized as the owners of the land as long as they paid revenue to the East India Company regularly. The ownerships were made inherited and transferable. On the other hand, the peasants were reduced to the lower position of measly tenants and were disadvantaged of long-standing and customary rights to the soil^[31]. The sum of revenue that zamindars had to pay to the Company was firmly fixed. In other words, the Company got 89 percent leaving marginal portion of the land revenue with the zamindars.

The realized proceeds had been divided into 11 parts. 1/11th share goes to zamindars and 10/11th to the Company. The method was bitterly criticized on the ground that it was adopted with unjustifiably. The blatant defect of this arrangement was that no attempt was made ever either to survey the lands or to assess their value. The assessment was made roughly on the basis of accounts of previous collections and it was done in an irregular manner. This had resulted in a great deal of misery amongst the peasants and farmers. The peasants were left on the mercy of zamindars that raised the rents to unbearable limits^[32].

Ryotwari system

Ryotwari System was brought by Thomas Munro in 1820. In this particular system the ownership was transferred to the peasants and the government assessed the tax straightly from the cultivators. There was no intermediary like zamindars between peasants and the government. As long as peasant paid the revenue in time, the peasant was not evicted from the land. The revenue rates in this system fixed 50 percent for dry lands and 60 percent for an irrigated land which prevails for a particular time periods such as 20 to 40 years. In this system, the peasant was held personally responsible for direct payment of land revenue to the government. The revenue official indulged in harsh measures with the peasants for non-payment or delayed payment^[33]. The cultivators shortly understood that the large number of zamindars had been substituted by one giant zamindar (*i.e.* State) and if they failed to pay land revenue properly, their land would have been sold. The government, later unequivocally declared that land revenue, in fact, was a rent and not tax^[34].

Mahalwari system

Lord William Bentick introduced this system in North-West Frontier, Central Province, Punjab, Agra, Gangetic Valley, *etc* of British India in 1833^[35]. The Mahalwari system have some similar features of both zamindari and ryotwari system. The area was divided into mahals in this system. Each mahal consisted one or more than one village and village committees were accountable to collect the taxes. This system also eliminated middlemen between the government and the village community, yet its benefit was largely enjoyed by the government^[36].

By this system, the British brought a new form of private property in such a way that the benefit would only go to them and not to cultivators. In whole country, land was subject to sale, mortgage and alienable. The government would have found it very difficult to collect revenue, if the

land had not been made transferable by any of said method. So the cultivators have to borrow money on the security of their land or even sell a part of it and pay land revenue^[37]. This system proved to be disastrous for the farmers in coming years, where this system compelled farmers to borrow or took loans from the moneylenders to pay land revenue^[38].

Peasants movement in India

The exertion was started for recognition of peasants' right by 1857 mutiny. The major causes of their dissatisfaction were not assigning ownership rights to the peasants and abolish of zamindari system. After the *Indigo Revolt* of 1859-60 in Bengal the British government was required to pass the Tenants Occupancy Rights Act, 1859^[39] giving some rights to the tenants. During the movement, peasants were acknowledged of the laws, their rights and capability to organize for peaceful protest. British government again compelled to pass the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 for the protection of tenants from the worst aspects of zamindari oppression, though it was imperfectly implemented^[40].

Indian National Congress also agitated to get the land revenue fixed permanently on lower scales, so that enhancement of land revenue should not happen inconsistently^[41]. Another movements of *Non-cooperation* and *Khilafat* movement raising demands like security of tenure and abolition of illegal exaction in any form. Regarding land reform measures, resolution was passed in *Karachi session* to recognize certain rights of the peasants as fundamental rights^[42] to be included in future Constitution of India^[43].

The Congress election campaign received massive response and once again aroused the political consciousness and energy of the people in 1937 election. In its election manifesto reaffirmed the restoration of civil liberties, the removal of disabilities on grounds of sex and untouchability, the radical transformation of the agrarian system, substantial reduction in rent and revenue, scaling down of the rural debts and provisions of cheap credit. The Congress government was committed to liquidate British rule took charge of administration under a constitution, which could moreover be taken away from the Indians whenever the imperial power so desired. The Congress Governments attempted and brought schemes to pass several legislations to improve peasants' conditions^[44].

Land reforms in Post-Independence

The spirit of our Constitution provides in the preamble which ensures the Equality and Equal Opportunity before the Law, Justice of Social, Political and Economic secures among the people of India. Our leaders had dreamt of promulgating all these cherished goals through land reforms and deliberated the need of land reforms prior to independence. The *Agrarian Reforms Committee*^[45] under chairmanship of Shri J.C. Kumarappa had proposed plans to put together land reform policies in independent India. The committee was of the view that:

- I. All intermediary concerns must abolished and land belong to the tiller;
- II. Excluding widows, minors and other disabled persons, land leasing to be prohibited.
- III. All tenants cultivating for 6 years must be granted occupancy rights;

IV. Tenants must given the option to acquire holdings at fair value to be ascertained by the tribunal;

Zamindari and intermediaries abolition acts

First Five-Year Plan had clearly brought the land related strategy to be undertaken for proper land reforms. Majority of the states passed laws^[46] for zamindari abolition and similar cruel land occupancy systems. The tenancy refers to the relationship among the land holder and the tiller of the soil. Many land owners were not cultivating lands by their own but handing over it to the tillers and receiving rent for that. These types of owners were known as absentee landlords. Increasing population was the obvious reason of this situation. In 1955, the total number of families dependent on agriculture was 23.6 percent belonging to the tenant. The National Sample Survey Organization^[47] laid down that, the land leased out differed from 11 percent to 26 percent in different states. This necessitated the enacting of legislation for tenancy reforms.

All states fixed different rates of rents to be applicable in the state. For instance, Rajasthan, Gujarat and Bombay fixed one-sixth of the gross produce as the maximum rent; whilst Punjab fixed one-third as rent of the produce. Then it was discovered that the eviction of tenants took place on large scale for resumption of personal cultivation. As a result of tenancy legislations in India, it was reported by draft Fourth Five Year Plan that three million tenants or share croppers became the land owners. Uttar Pradesh was the vanguard in this process. The next in line was Maharashtra where 13.56 lakh tenants acquired ownership rights. The ultimate object of the reforms is "land to the tiller". The land reform procedures adopted by the states after independence, provided the basis for agricultural developments that took place in the country later on^[48].

land and tenancy reforms in state of PUNJAB

The land and tenancy reforms have been started in Punjab soon after the independence. At the time of independence state of Punjab has been divided in two regions, one was Punjab region and other was PEPSU means the Patiala and East Punjab States Union. In both of these regions there was two different legislations^[49] were prevailing. The object of these two legislations was to provide for security of land tenures and other incidental matters. These were the special Acts in matter of land tenure and intended to help the tenants in matter of arbitrary ejections. It provided greater security of tenure and a summary remedy for recovery of rent and adjustment of tenants in the smaller and simpler case. The PEPSU Act has been enacted in the region as a measure of agrarian reforms as to curtail situation of deteriorated and strained relation of the tenants with landlords^[50]. This Act also provides the ceiling limit, surplus area and scheme for utilization of surplus land for agriculture worker and tenants who have land holding less than five standard acres^[51].

The Punjab land reforms ACT, 1972

This Act had been passed by the Punjab Legislative Assembly after long debate to fulfill the Constitutional mandate. It has been enacted to give effect to the recommendations of the Land Reforms Committee appointed by the government of India evolving a national policy to secure additional land for the distribution. This Act suitably reduces the limit of permissible area and makes

family a unit for the purpose of permissible area and thereby intends to acquire surplus area for allotment to the landless persons^[52]. The key features of this Act were to bring radical changes in the agrarian economy and comprehensively mechanization of farming. On the other hand, the important idea of the Act was to carry out cherished principles of Article 39 (b) and (c)^[53] of the Indian Constitution. This Act hence, placed a ceiling on the agricultural land which a person or family may hold^[54].

Harchand Singh, MLA Committee^[55] was formed in Punjab to unearth corruption in land reforms. The complaints were received by the government of Punjab regarding misappropriation of land by the high officials and a number of legislators colluding revenue departments. The important aspects of this committee was to confine its enquiry to the disposal of the 'Surplus rural evacuee agricultural land' transferred in different categories by the central government to the states through a package deal in 1961^[56]. That land was to dispose of by an open auction which provided an opportunity to many, even who were not eligible to bid in the auction, to purchase big chunks of land on cheap rates. This was the tragic outcome of the policy frustrated the cherished ideology of 'land for landless tillers.'

The committee had observed that the land was purchased under fictitious name which was called '*Benami*'. To prohibit the *benami* transactions in property the Law Commission of India submitted two Reports^[57] to the Central government in 1973 and 1988. The problem of *benami* has been tackled by the Central government by promulgating the *Benami* Transactions (Prohibition) Act, 1988 on the recommendation of the Law Commission Report^[58] which was amended in 2016. The Benami Transaction (Prohibition) Amendment Act, 2016 has taken the place of old law on 1st of November, 2016^[59].

National land reforms policy, 2013

To deal with a number of significant issues associated to land, the requirement for a National Land Reforms Policy is more vital today than ever before. The Government of India has prepared a Draft of National Land Reforms Policy for the proper implementation of the land reforms in India. According to new system and taking into consideration the new aspects of land relations, it will be based on utilization of land for industries, homestead of homeless, other agricultural or non-agricultural^[60]. Recognizing the need for land among the poorer section of the society, many state governments had come up with land distribution programs to facilitate land ownership for the poor.

The government land which is vacant and is fit for cultivation was assigned to the landless poor for cultivation purposes. Similarly the land which is suitable for dwelling purposes was given to the rural poor for their housing/homestead purposes. In addition to the government lands, other categories of land like the ceiling surplus land, Bhoodan lands etc. were also distributed to the landless poor for cultivation^[61]. Despite that the condition of the tenants has been remaining identical as it was in the preceding time. It is an imperative for the governments to consider the situation of the tenants who have been consisting large part of the peasantry in Punjab and India.

Conclusion

Land is the main source of human existence. Human being developed many systems for utilization and management of

land in every civilization. Zamindari system, Ryotwary and Mahalwary system is the one of the best example of Indian land management and reforms. With the passage of time there is always need to change the law according to requirements and demands of society. For this purpose every state enacted laws according to new socio-economic changes. Land reform measurement is based upon constitutional spirit and first five year plan. So, in India ceiling laws for termination of zamindari system, utilization of surplus land and distribution of surplus land among landless people is the one of the great reflection of welfare nature of Indian constitution.

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9. Available at <http://www.bsm-ancientbharat.in/index.php/item/297-agriculture-in-ancient-indian-vedic-period-part-1> (last visited on 17/07/2018).
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15. Supra note 8 at 3.
16. Supra note 8 at 40.
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19. Id at 135.
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 34. Supra note 30.
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 37. Supra note 33.
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 39. Act no. X of 1859.
 40. Supra note 27 at 51-55.
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 42. Which were as follows:
 - A. Substantial reduction in agricultural rent or revenue paid by the peasantry and in case of uneconomic holdings, exemption for rent for such periods as may be necessary.
 - B. Relief of agricultural indebtedness and control of usury-direct and indirect.
 - C. Labour to be freed from serfdom or conditions bordering on serfdom.
 - D. Peasants and workers shall have the right to form unions to protect their interests.
 - E. Imposition of a progressive income tax on agricultural income above a fixed minimum.
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 52. Narula DP. *Punjab and Haryana Land Laws* 103 (Allahabad Law Agency, Faridabad, 2015).
 53. Which provides the ownership and control of material resources of the community are so distributed as best to sub-serve the common good, and spells that the operation of the economic system does not result in the concentration of wealth and means of production to the common detriment.
 54. Harshali Chowdhary, *Punjab and Haryana Land Laws* 323 (Central Law Publication, Allahabad, First ed. 2016).
 55. The Enquiry Committee of Legislators, Appointed by Government to probe into the setting up of Sizeable Agricultural Farms on Evacuee Lands by Officers, their relatives and other influential Public Men. The Committee was headed by Mr. Harchand Singh, MLA. Other members of the Committee were Shri Jaswinder Singh Brar, MLA; Shri Darshan Singh K.P.MLA; Shrimati Gurdev Kaur, MLA; Shri Darshan Singh Canadian, MLA; shri Satpal Singh Randhawa, MLA; Shri Brij Lal Goel, MLA and Chaudhary Darshan Singh, MLA.
 56. Cultivable land about 80,000 standard acres, banjar land about 111,000 acres and gairmumkin land (which was not known) about 103,344 ordinary acres during 1961-62.
 57. 57th Report of Law Commission of India 1973 on Benami Transactions, Ministry of Law, Justice & Company Affairs, Government of India.

58. 130th Report of Law Commission of India 1988 on Benami Transactions, Ministry of Law & Justice, Government of India.
59. The Benami Transaction (Prohibition) Amendment Act, 2016 (Act No. 50 of 2016).
60. Draft National Land Reforms Policy, draft for discussion purposes and comments, Department of Land Resources, Ministry of Rural Development, Government of India, 2013 at. 2.
61. Id at 4.