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1 Introduction

Resolution of the land question in contemporary rural India remains an unfinished task and a critical issue. With neoliberalism as the dominant ideology guiding state policy, Indian state has abdicated the responsibility of implementing land reforms. This makes it even more important for people interested in progressive change to revisit the land question and the need for land reforms. What is the land question in rural India today? How unequally is land distributed in rural India and how has land distribution changed over time? What have been the trends in respect of landlessness in rural India? Are land reforms still relevant?

This paper deals with these concerns. It presents a detailed analysis of data on landholdings in an attempt to answer some of these questions.

The paper is organised as follows. In Section 2, we discuss the data and their limitations. Section 3 presents a discussion on the extent of landlessness in Indian states and in India. It also discusses disparities in land ownership among different social groups and gender. In Section 4, we present data on inequality in ownership of land in India. In this section, we specifically examine whether there has been a proliferation of very small holdings in India and if the large landholdings have disintegrated in recent times. Section 5 presents a discussion on variation in incidence and forms of tenancy in India. In the concluding section, we argue that the evidence presented in the paper points at continued relevance of land reforms in India.

2 Data on landholdings of rural households

Official statistics on land are very poor and severely understate inequality in the access of rural households to land. Agricultural Censuses and the NSSO Surveys of Land and Livestock Holdings (NSSO-SLLH) are the two most widely used sources of data on landholdings.

Agricultural Censuses are based on retabulation of land records in most states.¹ There are, however, no clear guidelines on how this retabulation is done. The task is done at the state-level, with little supervision to ensure uniformity. Land records are records of ownership of land by individuals. Since tenancy is seldom recorded in land records, only a small proportion of tenancy is captured in Agricultural Censuses. Land records also do not contain any information on households. Although operational holdings in agricultural censuses refer to land operated as a single technical unit, it is not clear how land operated by households but registered under the names of various members of households (and other family members) are identified and aggregated to obtain operational holdings. Such parcels of land may even be located in different villages. Land records are often outdated and do not reflect the correct status of ownership and possession. They are also, in

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¹The system of plot-by-plot enumeration for land records exists only in areas that were under temporary settlements during the British period. In such areas, land records form the basis for Agricultural Censuses. In states that were under the Permanent Settlement as well as in the North-eastern states, systems of plot-by-plot enumeration for land records do not exist. In these states, Agricultural Censuses are based on sample surveys.

most states, very poorly maintained (Mishra and Suhag, 2017). In most states, computerisation of land records is an ongoing task. For the purpose of the 2015-16 Agricultural Census, an unsuccessful attempt was made to use computerised land records database in Gujarat and Maharashtra. However, the effort was abandoned because of inadequacy of information available in the database and other teething problems.²

Identification of *de facto* operational holdings from the records of individual ownership of land is an almost impossible exercise. In reality, no serious effort is undertaken to identify operational holdings for Agricultural Censuses. Since that India had about 16.8 crore rural households as per the Census 2011, and anything between 30-50 per cent of rural households are landless, the total number of operational holdings recorded in the Agricultural Census (13.8 crores in 2011-12) is clearly an overstatement. This is likely to be a result of poor enumeration based on land records.

Until the 70th round (for 2012-13), NSSO Surveys on Land and Livestock Holdings (NSSO-SLLH) are conducted once in ten years. A detailed assessment of these surveys and issues related to the comparability of estimates from different rounds of these surveys can be seen in Rawal (2008) and Bansal, Usami, and Rawal (2018). It was recently decided to conduct the surveys on agriculture and landholdings once in five years rather than once in ten years. In addition, in the 77th round, the survey on Land and Livestock Holdings was merged with the Situational Assessment Survey.³ This is a major improvement as canvassing Land and Livestock Survey and Situational Assessment Survey on two separate samples of households meant that information on related aspects of agrarian economy could not be analysed together. This problem has been resolved with the merging of the two surveys. There are, however, two important changes in the way questions on landholdings are administered that need to be noted. First, the new survey schedule does not collect plot-by-plot information on landholdings. As a result, the data cannot be used for analysing parcellisation (fragmentation) of holdings. Secondly, data on extent of holdings are now recorded in acres rather than in hectares, with the 0.01 acres (rather than 0.01 hectares) being the smallest unit of enumeration of land. This can have a bearing on estimates of landlessness (see Rawal, 2013) and adjustments should be done when estimating landlessness for comparison with estimates from the previous surveys.

Until recently, NSSO also collected data on operational holdings of land in the quinquennial surveys of consumption expenditure and employment (see Rawal, 2013, for a detailed assessment). However, after the 68th round, the employment surveys (NSSO-EUS) were replaced with the Periodic Labour Force Surveys (PLFS) and questions related to land were excluded. Data from the last round of the consumption survey (for 2017-18) have also not been released. Consequently, data on operational holdings of land from these surveys are only available up to the 68th round (for 2011-12).

In this paper, we use two additional sources of data on landholdings.

In the Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC), conducted in 2011, information on ownership of land was collected from all rural households. Although household-

²<http://agcensus.nic.in/egov.html>

³The latest 77th round NSSO survey is called the Survey of Land and Livestock Holding of Households and Situational Assessment of Agricultural Households. In this paper, we use the term NSSO-SLLH to refer to all rounds of the Survey on Land and Livestock Holding.

Table 1: Number of rural households in the sample, different rounds, National Family Health Surveys, India

Year	Sample
1992-93	59,740
1998-99	61,800
2005-06	58,805
2015-16	425,563

Source: Based on different rounds of the National Family Health Surveys.

level data from the SECC are not available, and therefore it is not possible to examine inequality in ownership of land, the aggregated tables provide information on the proportion of landless households, and proportion of households that have irrigated and unirrigated land, at the national, state, district and taluk levels.

The National Family Health Surveys (NFHSs), which are large, nationally-representative surveys, also collect limited but useful information on ownership of agricultural land. Since 1992–93, five rounds of NFHSs have been conducted. The data for the last round, for 2019–20, have not yet been released. While the first three rounds covered about 60,000 rural households in the sample, the sample size for the 2015-16 round was much bigger and included over 425,000 rural households (Table 1). There have been some changes in the way data were collected on agricultural land in different NFHS rounds.

- In all the surveys, sample households are first asked whether or not they owned any agricultural land. This can be used to obtain comparable estimates of proportion of households that do not own land from all the surveys.
- In the 1992-93 survey, if a sample household reported that they owned some agricultural land, it was asked how much irrigated and how much unirrigated land did they owned. This was a slightly complicated way of asking the information as the lack of information on irrigation status resulted in a significant number of blank values — neither a zero nor a positive number — being left in columns for irrigated and unirrigated land. In such cases, it is not possible to estimate total amount of land because of these blank entries. In subsequent surveys, the households were instead asked how much total land did they owned, and then were asked a third question about how much of their owned land was irrigated. In these rounds, information on total amount of land is recorded even if there is some ambiguity about the irrigation status. This difference makes the data on the extent of ownership holdings from the 1992–93 survey non-comparable with subsequent rounds of the National Family Health Surveys.
- In the 1992-93 survey, information on the extent of land was recorded only in acres and saved in the database as such. In the subsequent three surveys, information was recorded in acres and, at the stage of data entry, also converted into hectares and recorded in hectares. In the first three surveys, the fields recorded three digits of information with largest allowed number being 995 (acres or hectares). Numbers from 996–999 were reserved as special codes. In the fourth

round, only two digits were allowed with 95 being the largest number allowed. In this case, numbers 96–99 were reserved as special codes.

This means that, in the 1992-93 survey, the largest extent of land recorded was 995 acres (about 402 hectares). In the 1998-99 and 2005-06 surveys, the largest amount of land that could be recorded was 995 hectares. And in the 2015-16 survey, the largest amount of land that could be recorded was 95 hectares. These differences affect the accuracy with which land of large owners is provided in the data from the surveys. To make the data comparable, we have imposed a ceiling of 95 hectares on all surveys. That is, all households that had more than 95 hectares, were treated as having 95 hectares. This results in some under-estimation of inequality and the share of area under large landholdings.

- In the 2005-06 and 2015-16 surveys, field investigators were also allowed to record information in non-standard units if the information could not be converted to acres. This was done for about 4.5 per cent rural households in 2005–06 and 18.6 per cent rural households in 2015–16. The survey schedule did not require field investigators to even mention what non-standard unit was being used. This is a problem because, for such observations, the number cannot be converted to a standard unit (acres or hectares) and the proportion of such households is significant in the 2015-16 survey.
- In the latest two rounds, NFHS-4 and NFHS-5, an additional question on whether the land was owned solely by the male member of the family and/or by the female member of the family was also added. This additional question provides very useful data on the status of land ownership by women in India.

Unlike the NSSO-SLLH surveys, NSSO-EUS, SECC and NFHS ask only a few questions on land and these questions are part of a survey in which land is not the main focus. A distinguishing aspect of NFHSs is also that women are the primary respondents. It is possible that respondents are less likely to conceal the true extent of land that they own/operate when this information is obtained through just one or two questions as part of a survey that deals with many other things rather than in a survey that focuses on land and involves a detailed investigation about the extent, nature and use of landholdings.

3 Landlessness in Rural India

All nationally-representative surveys with data on landholdings show that a large proportion of rural households in India do not own any agricultural land (Table 2). This proportion increased significantly over the last three decades.

As per the latest NSSO Survey of Land and Livestock Holdings (NSSO-SLLH), about 41 per cent of households in rural India did not own any agricultural land in 2018-19. Other national surveys suggest that the proportion of landless households in rural areas might be significantly higher than what is estimated in NSSO-SLLH. The Socio-Economic Caste Census (SECC) conducted in 2011 found that 56 per cent of rural households did not own any agricultural land. As per the last round of the National Family Health Surveys (NFHS-4) for which data are available, 47.4 per cent of rural households did not own any agricultural land in 2015–16. NSSO Employment and Unemployment Surveys (NSSO-EUS) can be used to get estimates of proportion of households that do not cultivate any land. Since these surveys are unlikely to capture tenancy, it is not surprising that the estimates of proportion of households that do not cultivate any land (49 per cent in 2001-12) are very close to

Table 2: Proportion of households that do not own any agricultural land, rural India in per cent

Year	NSSO-SLLH	NFHS	SECC	NSSO-EUS ¹
1991-92	29.3	—	—	—
1992-93	—	35.4	—	—
1993-94	—	—	—	35.0
1998-99	—	38.7	—	—
1999-00	—	—	—	39.0
2002-03	32.1	—	—	—
2004-05	—	—	—	43.0
2005-06	—	41.5	—	—
2009-10	—	—	—	47.0
2011	—	—	56.4	—
2011-12	—	—	—	49.0
2012-13	34.5	—	—	—
2015-16	—	47.4	—	—
2018-19	40.8	—	—	—

Note: Estimates based on NSSO-EUS data are for households not having any operational holding of land. See Rawal (2013).

Source: Based on NSSO Surveys of Land and Livestock Holdings, National Family Health Surveys, Socio-Economic Caste Census and NSSO Employment-Unemployment Surveys.

the estimates of proportion of households that do not own any land from the NFHS (47.4 per cent in 2015-16).

Data from all the sources show that the extent of landlessness among rural households has increased since the early 1990s (Table 2). As per NSSO-SLLH, proportion of landless households increased by about 12 percentage points between 1991-92 and 2018-19. The NFHSs show a similar level of increase between 1992-93 and 2015-16. As can be seen in Table 3, at the state-level, the estimates of proportion of landless households from NFHS in 2015-16 were very close to the proportion of landless households computed from the SECC. Landlessness was high in Kerala, West Bengal and Tripura despite a significant amount of land redistribution in these states through land reforms. These states had a very high population density, which meant that despite redistribution and very small size of holdings, a large proportion of households continued to remain landless. The extent of landlessness in these states may be somewhat overstated because the data do not account for cultivation on homestead lands. Distribution of homestead lands was an important component of land reforms in these states and allowed beneficiaries to use it for marginal cultivation. Landlessness was also high in states like Punjab, Haryana, Andhra Pradesh and Tamil Nadu, where no land redistribution has been done through land reforms and the path of agricultural transformation has increased rural inequalities.

Table 3: Proportion of households that do not own any agricultural land, by state, in per cent

States	NSSO-SLLH 2018–19	SECC 2011	NFHS-4 2015–16
Himachal Pradesh	10.9	22.0	28.4
Punjab	64.5	64.5	65.0
Haryana	47.9	55.9	55.8
Bihar	49.9	65.6	54.1
West Bengal	55.0	69.6	62.1
Jharkhand	20.0	37.7	30.9
Odisha	43.4	54.3	41.9
Rajasthan	25.0	38.0	33.8
Gujarat	37.4	55.3	43.3
Maharashtra	40.9	53.7	44.8
Andhra Pradesh	63.7	73.4	60.9
Karnataka	34.5	46.6	44.3
Kerala	37.5	72.5	79.7
Tamil Nadu	65.3	73.4	69.1
Telangana	41.5	57.5	44.5
Uttarakhand	29.7	43.3	41.9
Uttar Pradesh	32.6	44.8	33.2
Chhattisgarh	34.6	46.7	33.8
Madhya Pradesh	31.9	54.7	39.0
Assam	39.4	56.7	51.9
Jammu & Kashmir	13.9	22.4	20.3
Sikkim	22.1	39.8	34.7
Arunachal Pradesh	14.4	44.1	39.4
Nagaland	8.8	42.6	38.5
Manipur	23.2	70.0	69.4
Goa	54.5	91.6	82.6
Mizoram	21.5	79.5	46.8
Tripura	54.4	68.3	72.7
Meghalaya	19.6	76.0	66.3
India (incl UT)	40.8	56.4	47.4

Source: Based on NSSO Surveys of Land and Livestock Holdings, 77th round, Socio-Economic Caste Census and National Family Health Survey, 4th round.

The land question in India is inextricably linked to the caste question. Historically, as part of the caste system, dalits were denied the right to own agricultural lands. While such practices were outlawed in the constitution of independent India, the impact of historical injustice and continuation of discriminatory social practices in various forms have meant that disparities in ownership of land across dalits and caste Hindus did not decline (Bakshi, 2008; Rawal, 2014; Thorat and Newman, 2012; Thorat and Newman, 2007). Along with dalits, Muslim households in rural India also face discrimination in access to land (Sachar Committee, 2006). Consequently, landlessness among dalits and Muslim households in rural India continues to be disproportionately high. While the disparities were seen in all the sources of data, the NFHSs recorded a higher degree of landlessness among dalits and Muslim households than the NSSO surveys. As per the NFHS data for 2015-16, 62 per cent of dalit households and 61 per cent of rural Muslim households did not own any land. Adivasis faced exclusion from ownership of land in multi-caste villages. Adivasis have also been dispossessed from land because of land acquisition projects for mining, industrial and other projects. As per NFHS, 41 per cent of adivasi households were recorded as landless in 2015-16. Both NSSO and NFHS data show a sharp rise in landlessness among dalits, adivasis, and muslim households from 2012-13 to 2018-19.(Table 4)

An important aspect of land rights in India is that land is mostly registered in the name of men and is inherited only by male descendants. In the latest round of NFHS (for 2015-16), a question was asked about whether land was registered in name of men, women or both. These data show that, in the country as a whole, land titles for 89 per cent of the landowning households were only in name of men (Table 5). The land titles were in the name of women in only 8.2 per cent of landowning households, and were shared by both men and women in 2.1 per cent of landowning households. Two States, Meghalaya and Kerala, where some communities and castes have had a tradition of matrilineal inheritance of land, stood out in respect of proportion of households where land titles were in name of women. In Meghalaya, 78 per cent of landowning households and in Kerala 32 per cent of landowning households had land registered in name of women (alone or jointly).

4 Land inequality

Not only are a large proportion of rural households in India landless, land is also highly unequally distributed among the rest. As per the latest NSSO-SLLH data, in 2018-19, the top 20 per cent households owned about 76 per cent of all the land (Table 6). The NFHS data show an even higher level of concentration. As per the NFHS data, the top 20 per cent households owned 83 per cent of all the land in 2015-16. This was 9 percentage points higher than the estimate for 1998-99.

4.1 Has there been a proliferation of tiny holdings?

It is commonly argued by scholars of different persuasions as well as policymakers that landholdings in India have got highly disintegrated over the years because of population growth and subdivision or partitioning between the inheritors of land. There has been, it is argued, a proliferation of uneconomic and unviable very small holdings.

Table 4: Proportion of households with no owned land, by social group, rural India, per cent

Social group	Dalit	Adivasi	Muslim	Others
NSSO Land and Livestock Surveys				
1991–92	42.4	22.9	—	—
2002–03	41.8	24.8	39.2	28.6
2012–13	46.2	26.7	41.9	30.6
2018–19	57.3	32.8	53.1	35.2
National Family Health Survey				
1992–93	51.2	30.2	46.3	31.3
1998–99	54.7	32.4	51.8	31.8
2005–06	57.4	33.0	54.5	34.5
2015–16	61.7	40.8	61.3	40.3

Source: Based on different rounds of NSSO Surveys of Land and Livestock Holdings and the National Family Health Surveys.

Although such arguments are not new, they have been widely used in the recent years. For example, Thimmaiah (2001) wrote that “the area as well as the number of small and marginal farms increased phenomenally during the last three decades. Though efforts were made to consolidate landholdings that were sub-divided and fragmented, operation of the provisions of land reforms and laws of inheritance prevented economically viable holdings from emerging as a normal feature of Indian agriculture“. Hazell (2005) argued that “continuing rural population growth on a fixed land base is creating a situation where the subdivision of small farms has or is approaching the point where many farms may now be too small to be efficient or to survive.” Singh (2006) wrote that “small farms are highly fragmented. Land transactions have led to further fragmentation making them non-viable in terms of resource use as well as family sustenance.” Padhee and Joshi (2019) claimed that “about 1.5 million-2 million new marginal and small farmers are added every year due to the law of inheritance.” Satyasai and Mehrotra (2016) stated that “the structure of Indian agriculture is skewed towards small producers operating tiny and uneconomical holdings.”

These arguments were also reiterated in many recent official policy documents. For example, the Tenth Five-Year Plan document stated that “with increasing population, land holdings are getting fragmented and becoming unviable” (Planning Commission, 2003). Planning Commission (2008) argued that “small land-owners who would otherwise have to operate small uneconomic holdings should have the opportunity to legally lease out land to other farmers with the assurance of being able to resume possession at the end of the stated period of tenancy.” Montek Ahluwalia, in an article about the approach of the Twelfth Five-Year Plan, wrote that “as holdings are subdivided and become uneconomic, very small and marginal farmers may be better off leasing out their land to more viable farmers” (Ahluwalia, 2011). Dalwai Committee (2018) argued that “under the conditions of agricultural production system obtaining in India, farming is faced with inefficient scales of

Table 5: Proportion of landowning households with land titles in names of women (singly or jointly), 2015–16, per cent

State	Per cent
Andhra Pradesh	17.0
Assam	7.3
Bihar	7.7
Chhattisgarh	11.1
Goa	19.8
Gujarat	8.2
Haryana	5.5
Himachal Pradesh	19.4
Jammu and Kashmir	5.1
Jharkhand	8.4
Karnataka	14.8
Kerala	32.0
Madhya Pradesh	9.2
Maharashtra	9.9
Manipur	8.6
Meghalaya	77.6
Mizoram	15.3
Nagaland	18.6
Odisha	7.2
Punjab	7.3
Rajasthan	7.2
Sikkim	5.1
Tamil Nadu	10.6
Telangana	17.9
Tripura	13.3
Uttar Pradesh	10.9
Uttarakhand	14.7
West Bengal	6.6
Union Territories	12.8
All-India	10.3

Source: Based on National Family Health Survey, 2015–16

Table 6: Distribution of owned land across quintiles of ownership holdings, per cent

Quintiles	NSSO-SLLH			NFHS		
	1991–92	2012–13	2018–19	1998–99	2005–06	2015–16
Bottom 20% households	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
20–40% households	1.3	0.8	0.0	1.4	0.7	0.1
40–60% households	9.3	8.5	4.8	6.8	5.8	3.7
60–80% households	21.5	20.5	19.5	17.7	17.4	13.0
Top 20% households	67.8	70.2	75.7	74.1	76.1	83.1
All households	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Based on NSSO Surveys of Land and Livestock Holdings, 48th, 70th, 77th rounds and National Family Health Surveys, 2nd, 3rd and 4th rounds.

operation due to small and marginal size of farms.” NITI Aayog (2015) elaborated the argument and stated that “over the generations, as families have grown, land holdings have come to be divided and fragmented into small economically unviable parcels and plots. Onerous leasing laws have prevented consolidation of these holdings. On the one hand, these smallholdings force owners to seek alternative means of livelihood and on the other their plots remain uncultivated with no prospect of being joined to other plots to produce more viable holdings.”

These arguments were used as the rationale for the Model Land Leasing Act designed to promote reverse leasing as a mechanism for increasing the scale of production. The Haque Committee, which drafted the Model Land Leasing Act, argued that “marginal and small farmers would be better off leasing out their land to more viable farmers for rent, while seeking paid employment within or outside agriculture” (Haque Committee, 2016).

Most of these studies and official documents cite Agricultural Censuses to show the proliferation of very small holdings. As described in Section 2, Agricultural Censuses do not have a systematic way of identifying household operational holdings. In states where they are based on land records, they are likely to separately record holdings of individuals as operational holdings. The Agricultural Censuses also do not have a specified mechanism for aggregating land owned across different administrative units. Such problems are likely to result in false data showing high level of fragmentation of holdings.

What do other sources of data show? All large-scale household surveys except the last two rounds of NSSO-SLLH found that more than half of total area is in holdings that are larger than two hectares (Table 7). As per the NFHSs, over 70 per cent of the land was owned by households with two hectares of land or more. These are not tiny, uneconomic holdings. Although official surveys do not capture large holdings very well, and thus overstate the prevalence of smaller holdings, even they do not show that most of the land is divided into uneconomic holdings.

The NFHSs, which are the only surveys that record large landholdings, show that the changes in land distribution were such that, on the one hand, there was a swelling in the ranks of the landless households and, on the other, a considerable

Table 7: Proportion of land in holdings of two hectares or more, 1987–88 to 2018–19, per cent

Year	NSSO-SLLH	NFHS	NSSO-EUS
1987–88	—	—	68.4
1991–92	64.4	—	—
1993–94	—	—	63.9
1998–99	—	70.9	—
1999–00	—	—	58.7
2002–03	59.6	—	—
2004–05	—	—	57.0
2005–06	—	62.6	—
2009–10	—	—	57.3
2011–12	—	—	54.0
2012–13	43.1	—	—
2015–16	—	71.2	—
2018–19	41.7	—	—

Note: Estimates based on NSSO-EUS data are for households without operational holdings. See Rawal (2013).

Source: Based on NSSO Surveys of Land and Livestock Holdings, National Family Health Surveys and NSSO Employment-Unemployment Surveys.

accumulation of land by large landowners. The data do not show an increase in proportion of landowners owning very small amounts of land (Table 8).

Low level of incomes from agriculture is a problem exacerbated by neoliberal policies. These policies have also hastened the process of differentiation resulting in a sharp increase in landlessness and land inequality. While a discussion of causes of this crisis of incomes is beyond the scope of this paper, presenting the crisis of incomes in agriculture as a crisis caused because of proliferation of uneconomic holdings is an argument based on poor evidence. This has been a common position of mainstream economists and policymakers, and is nothing more than an attempt to conceal the real causes of the agrarian crisis.

4.2 Existence of large landholdings

The flip side of the argument that there was a proliferation of uneconomic holdings is that large holdings were subdivided due to inheritance and population growth. This is used to argue that redistributive land reforms were not relevant any more.

Of the various sources of data on landholdings, NFHSs are the only ones that capture large-scale holdings. The NFHS data show that a significant part of land is owned by those who have large amounts of land. A comparison of data from different rounds of NFHS also suggests that the share of holdings in the largest size-class (30 hectares or more) actually increased over the last two decades (Table 8). The state-level estimates show that, among large states, the share of land owned by

Table 8: Distribution of households and owned land across size-classes of ownership holdings, NFHS, 1998–99, 2005–06 and 2015–16, in per cent

	Households			Area		
	1998–99	2005–06	2015–16	1998–99	2005–06	2015–16
Landless	38.7	41.5	47.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
Marginal (0-1 ha)	34.9	33.8	19.6	14.0	19.5	14.9
Small (1-2 ha)	11.7	9.9	6.9	15.0	17.9	13.9
Marginal & Small	46.6	43.7	26.5	29.0	37.4	28.8
Medium-I (2-4 ha)	8.2	6.2	4.6	20.0	21.3	17.4
Medium-II (4-10 ha)	4.7	3.4	2.1	25.4	24.9	17.8
Medium	12.9	9.6	6.7	45.4	46.2	35.2
Large-I (10-20 ha)	0.9	0.5	0.4	11.5	8.4	7.8
Large-II (20-30 ha)	0.3	0.1	0.1	5.8	3.4	3.5
Large-III(>30 ha)	0.2	0.1	0.2	8.2	4.6	24.7
Large	1.4	0.7	0.7	25.5	16.4	36.0
Land specified in non-standard units	0.6	4.5	18.6	—	—	—
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Notes: In the last two rounds of NFHS, data on land for some households were recorded in non-standard, local units. These holdings are likely to be small. We have estimated that, depending on different assumptions about these non-standard local units, if these households are classified into different size-classes, it results in a small increase in share of land in the marginal and small holdings, and the share of the largest size-class falls slightly. In 2015-16, under different assumptions about the size of these non-standard units, the share of the top size-class varies between 20 and 24.7 per cent.

Source: Based on various rounds of National Family Health Surveys.

households with more than 30 hectares of land was highest in Tamil Nadu, Odisha and Bihar (Table 9).

It is relevant here to note that many village studies have also shown continued presence of large landholdings in Indian villages (Arora, 2021; Ramachandran, Rawal, and Swaminathan, 2010; Rawal and Ramachandran, 2013; Swaminathan and Das, 2017). Primary data-based studies have also shown that, barring the context when land ceiling acts were actively implemented in a few states, land market transactions resulted in the consolidation of holdings as dominant classes accumulated more and the best lands (Rawal, 2001).

5 The Question of tenancy

Tenancy relations in India, barring exceptions like West Bengal, are almost entirely informal. Such informal, insecure and exploitative tenancy contracts, often interlocked with unfree relations of labour, are not only unjust but can also

Table 9: Proportion of land owned by households having more than 30 hectares of land, by State, NFHS, 2015–16, in per cent

State	2015–16
Andhra Pradesh	1.4
Assam	6.4
Bihar	28.8
Chhattisgarh	4.6
Gujarat	6.6
Haryana	18.6
Himachal Pradesh	18.4
Jammu and Kashmir	23.8
Jharkhand	21.6
Karnataka	16.9
Kerala	10.8
Madhya Pradesh	17.2
Maharashtra	18.7
Odisha	37.5
Punjab	10.9
Rajasthan	11.1
Tamil Nadu	65.1
Telangana	9.1
Uttar Pradesh	7.1
Uttarakhand	27.4
West Bengal	24.3
India	20.4

Notes: Households owning more than 95 hectares of land were recorded as having 95 hectares of land in the data.

Source: Based on National Family Health Survey, 2015–16.

be growth-retarding. Mainstream positions on tenancy range from considering tenancy (and thus, tenancy reforms) as a marginal aspect of land relations to treating state-led tenancy reforms as a cause of prevalence of insecure tenancy. Along with an uneven and distorted penetration of capitalist relations in the Indian countryside, there were also significant changes in the extent of use of tenancy, in the class configuration of tenants and lessors, and in the form of tenancy contracts over the last few decades. With the state unwilling to effectively implement land reforms in most parts of India, tenancy relations have continued to be informal, exploitative and embedded in socio-economic power relations.

NSSO Surveys on Land and Livestock (NSSO-SLLH) are the only source of large-scale survey-based data on tenancy. The incidence of tenancy is likely to be under-reported in these surveys. It is therefore important to interpret results from these surveys carefully.

5.1 Increasing incidence of tenancy

The first main finding from our analysis of the NSSO-SLLH data is that, at the national level, there was a significant increase in the incidence of tenancy between 2002–03 and 2018–19.

In Table 10, we have compiled the estimates given in NSSO reports for the 26th and 37th rounds of NSSO-SLLH surveys. Our estimates based on unit-level data from the subsequent three surveys. These estimates show that the proportion of tenants among rural households and proportion of leased-in land in total operated area fell between 1971–72 and 2002–03. The decline in tenancy over this period was explained variously, including on account of problems of data (that is, inability of NSSO-SLLH to capture all tenancy contracts), reduction in supply of land for lease (eviction of tenants because of tenancy reform legislation, increasing dominance of marginal holdings, and resuming self-cultivation for better utilisation of capital invested by landowners in machinery and irrigation), and reduction in demand for leasing land (declining unemployment and poverty, and rising wages, during the 1980s).

The trends between 2002–03 and 2018–19, presented in Table 10, are in sharp contrast to the trends over the previous decades. At the national level, proportion of tenants among rural households increased from 8 per cent in 2002–03 to 10.9 per cent in 2018–19. The share of leased-in land in operated area increased from about 6.7 per cent in 2002–03 and 11.1 per cent in 2012–13 to 21.8 per cent in 2018–19. It is important to note that while the proportion of tenants rose only by 0.6 percentage point between 2012–12 and 2018–19, the share of leased-in land in the operated area almost doubled. This implies a significant rise in average area leased-in by a tenant, suggesting a shift towards leasing of land by large tenants.

It should be pointed out that the extent of tenancy reported by the lessors of land is considerably lower than the extent of tenancy reported by lessees or tenants. Sawant (1991) showed that there is a large concealment of tenancy in the data on leasing out in NSSO-SLLH, and that the extent of concealment is non-uniform across classes and states. Similarly, agricultural censuses also record very low levels of tenancy. In comparison with estimates presented in Table 10, only 0.94 per cent of the operated area was reported as being under tenancy contracts in the Agricultural Census for 2010–11. Given that most of the tenancy contracts in India are informal

Table 10: Tenants as a proportion of all rural and cultivator households, leased-in land as a proportion of total operated area, rural India, 1971–72, 1982, 1991–92, 2002–03, 2012–13 and 2018–19, in per cent

Year	NSSO Round	Tenants/ Rural households	Tenants/ Cultivator households	Leased-in area/ Operated area
1971–72	26	25.3	—	10.6
1982	37	17.8	24.0	7.2
1991–92	48	9.3	12.8	8.7
2002–03	59	8.0	11.4	6.7
2012–13	70	10.3	15.0	11.1
2018–19	77	10.9	17.4	21.8

Source: Estimates for 1971–72 and 1982 taken from NSSO (1986, 1987); estimates for 1991–92, 2002–03, 2012–13 and 2018–19 computed using the corrected unit-level data for each round.

and short-term, and do not comply with tenancy reform laws, landowners do not register tenancy contracts in land records.⁴

5.2 Increase in fixed-rent tenancy

Another trend that stands out clearly in the data is the increase in fixed-rent tenancy, and within that, of rental payments paid in money. The share of land cultivated on fixed rent in total leased-in land increased from about 33 per cent in 1991–92 and 47 per cent in 2002–03 to 55 per cent in 2012–13 and 2018–19 (Table 11). Since 2012–13, fixed rental payments in money has become the single most important category of types of tenancy contracts, and accounted for about 43 per cent of leased-in land in 2018–19.

In 2018–19, fixed money rent was the dominant type of contract in Punjab, Haryana, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu, Andhra Pradesh and Telangana. In Punjab, about 94 per cent of the leased-in land was under fixed money contracts. On the other hand, sharecropping was the dominant type of contract in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tripura, Jharkhand, Chhattisgarh and Orissa. With over 40 per cent leased-in land under sharecropping contracts.

The rise of fixed rent tenancy has been argued to be a result of, on the one hand, increasing access to irrigation, improved productivity and a reduction in uncertainty of production, and on the other, increased demand for leasing land because of increasing landlessness, lack of availability of decent non-agricultural employment and entry of large landowners in tenancy market. Fixed money rents are typically paid in advance and, therefore, are particularly favourable for richer tenants. However, if increasing landlessness, lack of mobility among workers, and entry of rich tenants into the tenancy market increase the competition for leasing in

⁴West Bengal, where registration of a substantial proportion of tenants in land records was achieved through Operation Barga in the late 1970s and early 1980s, is the only noteworthy exception on this account.

Table 11: Distribution of total leased-in area under various terms of lease, rural India, 1961–62, 1971–72, 1982, 1991–92, 2002–03, 2012–13 and 2018–19, in per cent

Year	Fixed rent			Produce share	Others and unspecified
	Fixed money	Fixed produce	Total		
1961–62	25.6	12.9	38.5	39.2	22.3
1971–72	15.4	11.6	27.1	47.9	25.1
1982	10.9	6.3	17.1	44.7	38.2
1991–92	19.0	14.5	33.5	34.4	32.1
2002–03	28.9	18.6	47.5	40.7	11.8
2012–13	39.9	15.2	55.1	30.8	14.1
2018–19	42.6	12.2	54.8	27.7	7.4

Sources: Estimates for 1961–62, 1971–72 and 1982 taken from NSSO (1986); for 1991–92 from NSSO (1992); and rest computed using unit-level data.

land, credit-constrained poor landless households may also be forced to accept fixed rent and other kinds of highly exploitative contracts (Rawal and Osmani, 2009).

5.3 Land-class position of tenant households

How are tenant households distributed across deciles and quintiles of ownership holdings? In which classes do we find an increase in incidence of leasing in? Table 12 shows the distribution of tenants and leased-in land across deciles of ownership holding. It shows that the bottom deciles, comprising landless households, had disproportionately low access to tenancy. Bulk of tenants are in the middle deciles. Although, the proportion of households that leased in land in the top decile of ownership holdings was smaller than the proportion in middle deciles, households in the top decile of ownership holding leased in large extents of land, and thus accounted for a disproportionately high share in the total area of land leased in.

Not only do middle and large landowners lease in a substantial proportion of land, there are also other resource-rich households that do not own any land but lease in substantial amounts of land. In fact, it is noteworthy that tenants who do not own any land are not all small peasants. A significant share of them are tenants with operational holdings in middle to top deciles. Table 13 shows that, over time, the proportion of landless tenants (tenants who did not own any land) whose operational holdings were in top two deciles of operational holding has increased. In 2018–19, about 24 per cent of landless tenants were in the top two deciles of operational holdings. These tenants, in the top two deciles of operational holding, accounted for 52 per cent of land leased-in by landless tenants. In contrast, bottom 40 per cent of landless tenants accounted for only 17 per cent of total land leased in by landless tenants.

These results are broadly consistent with findings of a number of other studies that have noted the entry of large, resource-rich tenants into the lease market (see, for example, Bharadwaj and Das, 1975; Jodha, 1981; Murty, 2004; Nadkarni, 1976;

Table 12: Distribution of tenant households and area leased-in across deciles of ownership holding, rural India, in per cent

Deciles	Distribution of tenants		Distribution of leased-in land	
	2002–03	2018–19	2002–03	2018–19
D1	7.9	9.8	6.3	7.8
D2	7.9	9.8	6.3	7.8
D3	7.9	9.8	6.3	7.8
D4	13.1	9.8	9.5	7.8
D5	11.9	9.6	8.8	6.1
D6	12.7	10.7	10.3	8.2
D7	13.0	10.5	10.6	8.7
D8	10.9	11.5	11.6	11.4
D9	8.2	9.9	10.8	12.6
D10	6.6	8.4	19.7	22.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Note: Tenants not owning any land were proportionately divided among bottom deciles comprising landless households.

Source: Based on NSSO Surveys of Land and Livestock Holdings.

Ramachandran, Rawal, and Swaminathan, 2010; Sidhu, 2005; Srivastava, 1989; Vyas, 1970).

5.4 Reverse tenancy

Reverse tenancy refers to tenancy transactions in which small, resource-poor landowners lease out land to large, resource-rich cultivators. Although the term reverse tenancy was not yet in vogue, in one of the earliest discussions of reverse tenancy, Nadkarni (1976) lucidly described the process as one in which, “members of the dominant class in rural society are entering into formal and informal lease agreements with the poor landholders for cultivation by the former, particularly in regions having the prospects of agricultural prosperity. Thus, the small owners surrender their operational control over land — if not ownership itself — in favour of the dominant.” The term reverse tenancy started to be used to describe such tenancy contracts from around 1980. In the Indian context, Vyas (1970) and Nadkarni (1976) were among the earliest commentators to argue that there is an increasing tendency of households from among dominant classes using tenancy to extend their operational control over land.

In a number of empirical studies of tenancy that followed, the increase in the proportion of large landowning households who lease in land was used to imply an increasing incidence of reverse tenancy in India. In one of the most widely cited study on reverse tenancy in India, Singh (1989), argued that reverse tenancy in central Punjab was on the rise despite the fact that most of the land in the primary data used in the paper was leased out by middle and large owners. Similarly, Deb *et al.* (2015) found that a substantial amount of land in ICRISAT survey villages

Table 13: Distribution of landless tenant households and area leased-in, across deciles of operational holding, rural India, in per cent

Deciles	Distribution of landless tenants		Distribution of land leased in by landless tenants	
	2002–03	2018–19	2002–03	2018–10
D1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
D2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
D3	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
D4	15.5	3.9	2.0	0.7
D5	16.2	17.3	6.8	6.4
D6	17.6	18.7	7.8	9.9
D7	18.6	18.7	12.7	11.7
D8	14.4	19.0	15.7	19.1
D9	11.1	13.0	21.0	20.1
D10	6.6	9.8	33.9	32.0
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Based on NSSO Surveys of Land and Livestock Holdings.

was leased in by large farmers, and interpreted it as an evidence of reverse tenancy. Sharma (2010) used another flawed measure – a greater increase in proportion of land leased out by marginal and small landowners than the increase in proportion of land leased in by the same category of landowners – as an indicator of increasing incidence of reverse tenancy.⁵ In many other studies, increasing incidence of reverse tenancy in India has been more of an assertion than a finding (see, for example, Kumar, 2006; Ramakumar, 2000; and Singh, 2002, 2012). Despite the weak evidence, several other scholars cited some of these studies, often further misinterpreting the evidence, and asserted that incidence of reverse tenancy was on the rise, particularly in the affluent states like Punjab and Haryana (see, for example, Parthasarthy, 1991; Shah and Harriss-White, 2011).

In contrast, most primary data-based studies that looked at the class-status of both lessors and tenants have come to very different conclusions. Sheila Bhalla (1983), in her detailed study of tenancy relations in Haryana, found that “small cultivators, in particular, have not chosen to lease out some or all of their land and to go to work as farm labourers.” She found that, apart from the large landowners, land was also leased out by small landowners who were engaged in non-agricultural occupations outside the village. On the relative class-position of lessors and tenants, she wrote that, “in many cases, the tenant and the owners are social and economic equals, especially if the tenant is a man who owns some land in addition to the land

⁵The measure does not account for the fact that, as per the NSSO data, proportion of marginal and small landowner households and share of total land owned by these households also increased over the same period. Also, since the share of marginal and small landowner households in land leased in remained much greater than the share of these classes in land leased out, the indicator does not necessarily imply an increase in leasing of land by small landowners to large land owners.

he takes on rent“ (Bhalla, 1983). Birthal and Singh (1994) studied tenancy contracts in Mirzapur and Varanasi districts of Uttar Pradesh. The data presented by them showed that only 2.63 per cent of tenancy contracts in the sample from Mirzapur and 6.18 per cent of tenancy contracts in the sample from Varanasi involved a small landowner leasing out land to a middle or a large landowning tenant.

Sharma and Dréze (1996) noted that in Palanpur (UP), “there seems to be some tendency for people to refrain from entering into tenancy contracts with individuals who own either a lot more or a lot less land than themselves.” While fixed rent tenancy was found to have become more prevalent in Palanpur in recent times, reverse tenancy was not found to be a significant phenomenon in more recent studies either (Tyagi and Himanshu, 2011a,b). In their study based on longitudinal surveys of 36 villages in Bihar, Sharma and Rodgers (2015) noted that while there had been a decline in the practice of landless households cultivating land on lease because of increased migration of workers from landless households, the incidence of reverse tenancy was small and had not increased. In PARI village studies, done in many different states of India since 2005-06, reverse tenancy was not found to be a dominant form of tenancy in any village (Ramachandran, Rawal, and Swaminathan, 2010; Rawal and Osmani, 2009; Swaminathan and Das, 2017; Swaminathan and Rawal, 2015).

Given this context, the pertinent question to ask is: what do the NSSO-SLLH data show about prevalence of reverse tenancy in India?

Before we deal with this question, we must reiterate some important limitations of NSSO-SLLH data. In NSSO-SLLH, no information is collected from tenants in the sample that could be used to identify the class status of lessors from whom they lease in land. Similarly, lessors in the sample are not asked information that could be used to identify the class-status of their tenants. Given this, the information provided in NSSO-SLLH is inadequate to identify tenancy contracts in which a small landowner leases out land to a large cultivator. This is a major limitation in using NSSO data to estimate the extent of reverse tenancy.

Given this constraint, the only possible way of using NSSO data to examine whether reverse tenancy is prevalent in any substantial measure is through a comparison of the distribution of lessors and tenants. If the distribution of leased-in land shows a greater concentration of larger landowners than the distribution of leased-out land, one could argue that tenancy is resulting in a net transfer of land from the small landowners to large landowners. Such a comparison, however, must be preceded by the caution that the extent of leasing out reported by landowners suffers from much greater under-reporting than the reporting by tenants. In the 77th round survey, only 2705 sample households, out of 58022 sample households for which data on landholdings were collected, reported having leased out any land. In comparison, 8366 households had leased in some land. The estimate of total leased out land for 2012–13 was only 5.1 million hectares; in comparison, the estimate for total leased in land was 21.7 million hectares. Since large landowners are more likely to under-report leasing out, the distribution of leased out land may be distorted to show less concentration of large landowners, and thus may falsely indicate the existence of reverse tenancy.

With these caveats, we compare the distribution of leased-in land (Table 12) and of leased-out land (Table 14) across deciles of ownership holdings. The tables show that there was a greater concentration of leased-out land than leased-in land in the hands of large landowners. In 2018–19, top-two deciles accounted for about

Table 14: Distribution of lessor households and area leased-out, across deciles of ownership holdings, rural India, in per cent

Deciles	Distribution of lessor households		Distribution of area leased out	
	2002-03	2018-19	2002-03	2018-19
D1	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
D2	0.0	0.0	0.0	0.0
D3	1.8	0.0	2.0	0.0
D4	4.7	0.0	4.8	0.0
D5	7.6	10.1	4.5	2.3
D6	9.6	10.6	6.4	4.2
D7	16.0	14.2	8.0	7.7
D8	13.5	19.4	4.0	11.5
D9	20.8	19.1	22.6	18.4
D10	25.9	26.5	27.6	55.9
Total	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: Based on NSSO Surveys of Land and Livestock Holdings.

35 per cent of all leased-in land and 74 per cent of all leased-out land. Between 2002-03 and 2018-19, there has been a significant increase in the dominance of large landowners in the distribution of leased-out land. While the proportion of lessors in the top two deciles of land ownership has remained almost the same at about 26 per cent, their share in total leased-out land has increased by 24 percentage points between 2002-03 and 2018-19. Small changes in the distribution of leased out land seen in lower deciles of land ownership are primarily a result of increased landlessness. Small landowners account for a very small share in the total leased out land. In 2018-19, the bottom 20 per cent households had leased out only 6.5 per cent of the total leased land.

In other words, these data do not support the possibility of a large-scale prevalence of reverse tenancy in India. In fact, NSSO-SLLH data are consistent with the conclusion that most tenancy contracts in India are either between large landowning lessors and poor tenants, or, lateral tenancy contracts, in which land is leased out by a household to another with a similar socio-economic status.⁶ The clearest example of dominance of lateral tenancy is seen in Punjab, where land is primarily owned by medium to large landowners belonging to Jat Sikh community, while landless households, mostly dalits, are excluded from tenancy markets as well. Data on tenancy in Punjab shows that the tenancy transactions take place only among the top few deciles of landowning, non-dalit households.

⁶Having analysed earlier rounds of NSSO-SLLH surveys, Sharma (1995) and Sharma (2009) also noted lack of a conclusive evidence about an increase in incidence of reverse tenancy. Sharma (2009) concluded that, “in most of the states, households with not very different farm size dominated the lease market both as lessees and lessors”.

6 Continued relevance of land reforms

It is well known that over the first four decades after Independence, land reform laws were enacted but were turned into paper tigers in most states because of a lack of serious political commitment to implement land reforms (Appu, 1996). After 1991, with the adoption of neoliberal policies, the state became even more hostile to the idea of implementation of land reforms. Not only did the implementation of land reforms cease to be on the policy agenda of the government, provisions of land reform laws were relaxed to varying degrees in most states. In West Bengal and Tripura, two states that had an impressive record of implementation of land reforms, electoral losses of the Left in the recent years have opened the floodgates to the demands for a reversal of land reforms.

From providing security of tenure and land to the tiller, state policy has moved to ensuring free and unrestricted functioning of land markets and assuring the rural rich that they need not fear losing land because of pro-poor interventions of the state. The 2016 Model Land Leasing Act, which the central government has been pushing all states to adopt, provides for “complete security of land ownership right” and has a provision for automatic eviction of the tenant after the fixed duration of the lease “without requiring any minimum area of land to be left with the tenant.” The Model Act also sets the stage for the state to abdicate the right to enforce rent ceilings or to outlaw exploitative provisions in rent agreements. The proposed act allows for “the terms and conditions of lease to be determined mutually by the landowner and the tenant without any fear on the part of the landowner of losing land right or undue expectation on the part of the tenant of acquiring occupancy right for continuous possession of leased land for any fixed period.”

The evidence presented in the foregoing sections strongly points to the continued relevance of redistributive land reform in India. A large proportion of rural households in India are landless, inequality in ownership and operational holdings of land is very high, and ownership of a significant amount of land continues to be concentrated in the hands of the large landowners. We have argued that the common narratives — that there has been a proliferation of small and uneconomic holdings; that large landholdings have disintegrated due to population growth and inheritance; and that tenancy has almost disappeared — are based on weak evidence. A careful assessment of the data show that landlessness and inequality in access to land increased sharply over the last few decades. The share of land owned by the large landowners also rose sharply. Along with this, the prevalence of informal and insecure tenancy also increased. There was also an increasing tendency of resource-rich farmers expanding their scale of production through leasing of land. This resulted in a marginalisation of poor households in the tenancy markets.

Given the vast rural inequalities, redistributive land reforms remain critical for progressive change in India. A push for capitalist development in agriculture, and the state-facilitated corporate penetration in agriculture in the recent times, has meant that rural poverty has deepened, rural inequalities have exacerbated, and caste and gender-based exclusion has remained deeply entrenched in all aspects of life. In states where a serious effort for implementation of land reforms was made, land reforms decisively turned the path of development in a more progressive direction. In Kerala, land reforms were the critical foundation on which developments in the areas of education, health and democratic polity were

built (Ramachandran, 2000). In West Bengal, land reforms created the impetus for agricultural growth and formed the basis for democratisation of institutions of local governments (Mishra and Rawal, 2002). In Tripura, land reforms paved way for impressive gains in areas of education and health, and social and economic empowerment of adivasis and women (Government of Tripura, 2007). However, with the emergence of national governments and state-level political forces that have been hostile to land reforms, these gains remained limited and are now under threat. Direct political interventions, discrimination in fiscal transfers and provision of credit, and creation of hurdles in the implementation of government schemes meant that even these states were not able to fully build upon the foundations provided by land reforms.

Political prospects of implementing land reforms have become bleak in the recent decades. This needs to change. Important struggles for land titles of forest dwellers under Forest Rights Act, and for redistribution of public and ceiling-surplus lands to the landless households have been taking place in many parts of India. It is important that these are strengthened significantly and the implementation of redistributive land reforms is brought back on the national policy agenda. Indian countryside is characterised by a vast mass of peasantry and rural workers who live in abject poverty, do not have access to decent education and health care, and do not access to basic amenities necessary for living a decent life. Implementation of land reforms is a precondition for this to change in a significant way.

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Resolution of the land question in contemporary rural India remains an unfinished task and a critical issue. With neoliberalism as the dominant ideology guiding state policy, Indian state has abdicated the responsibility of implementing land reforms. This makes it even more important for people interested in progressive change to revisit the land question and the need for land reforms.

What is the land question in rural India today? How unequally is land distributed in rural India and how has land distribution changed over time? Has there been a proliferation of tiny holdings and have large landholdings disintegrated? What have been the trends in respect of landlessness in rural India? Are land reforms still relevant?

This paper attempts to find answers to these questions on the basis of a detailed analysis of large-scale data on landholdings.

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Key words

land relations, land distribution, landlessness, land reform, tenancy, India

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