

Land Reforms in India

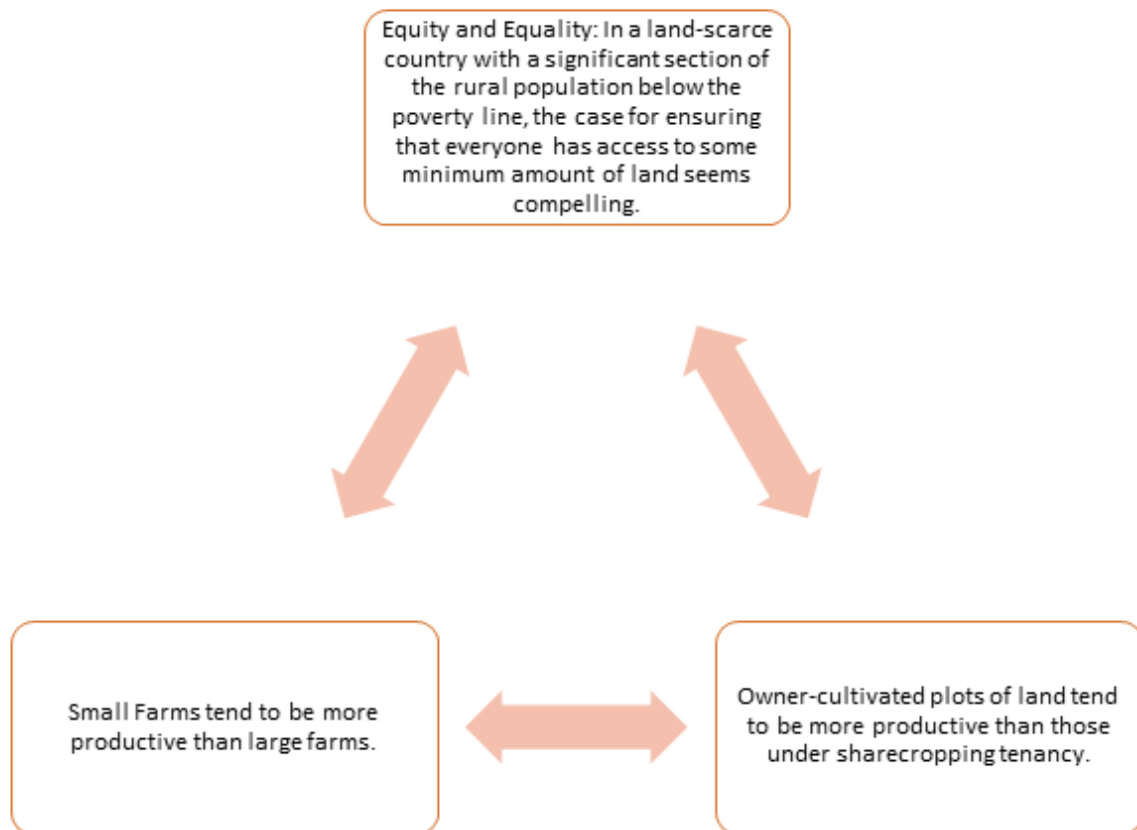
Land Reforms usually refers to redistribution of Land from rich to poor. It includes

- Regulation of Ownership
- Operation, Leasing, sale
- Inheritance of Land

In an agrarian economy like India with massive inequalities of wealth and income, great scarcity and an unequal distribution of land, coupled with a large mass of people living below the poverty line, there is strong economic and political arguments for land reforms.

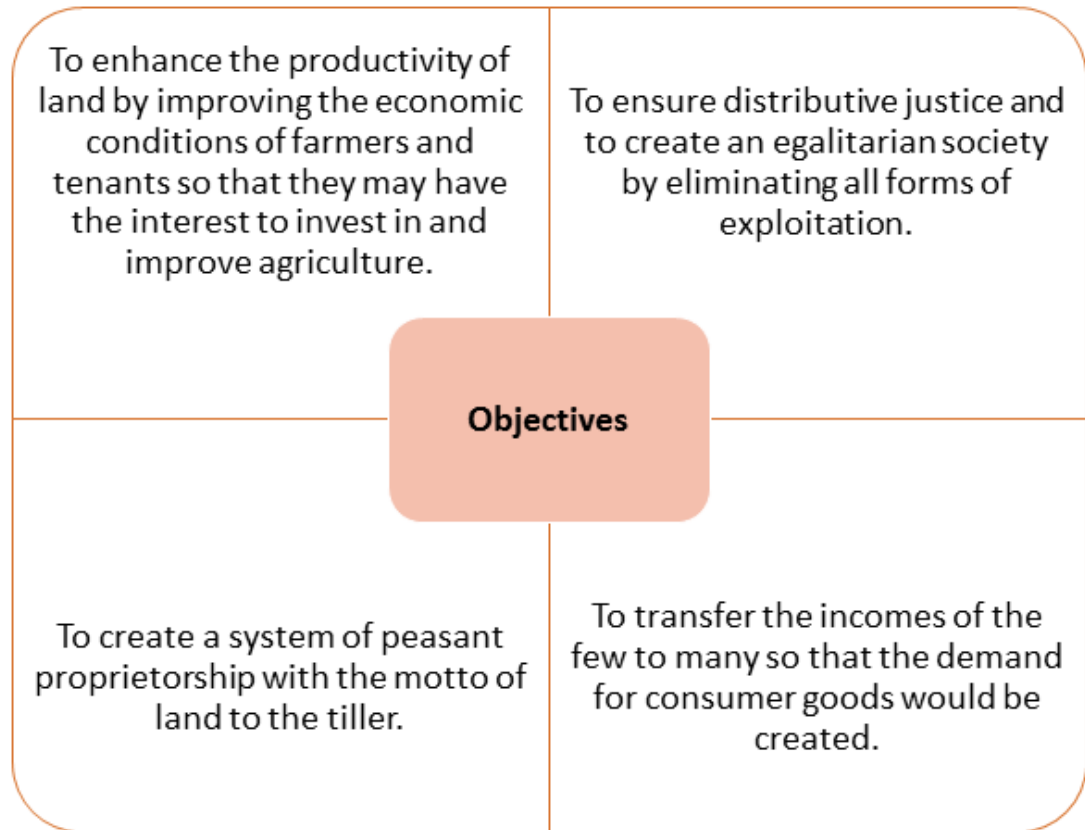
Due to all these compelling reasons, Land reforms had received top priority by the governments at the time of independence. The Constitution of India left the adoption and implementation of the land reforms to the state governments. This has led to a lot of variations in the implementation of land reforms across states.

Economic Arguments in Favour of Land Reforms

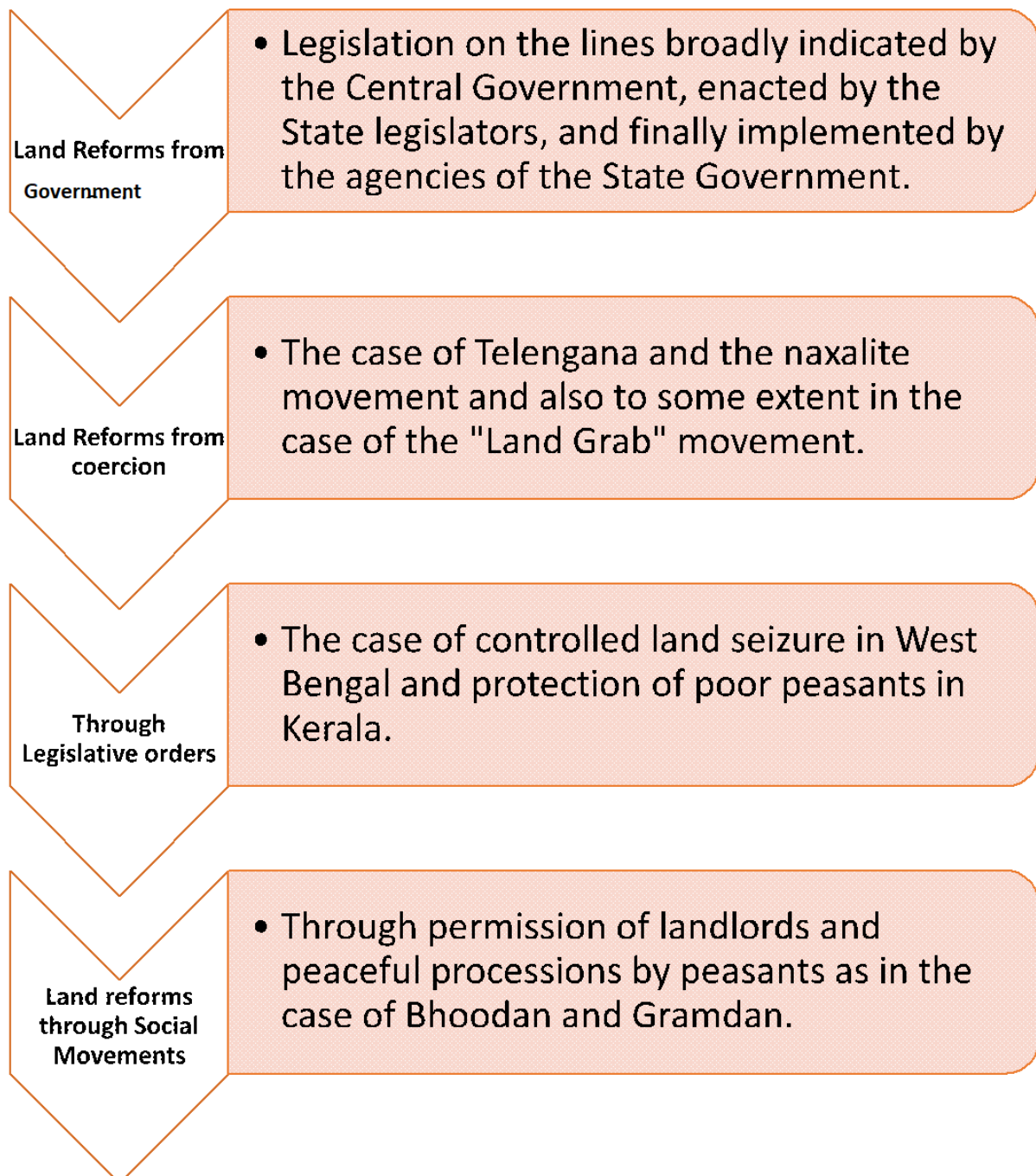


Given these observations, one could make an argument in favour of land reform based not only on equity considerations but also on efficiency considerations. For example, the inverse relationship between farm size and productivity suggests that land reform could raise productivity by breaking (less productive) large farms into several (more productive) small farms. Also, lower productivity under sharecropping suggests that land reform could raise productivity by converting sharecroppers into owner-cultivators.

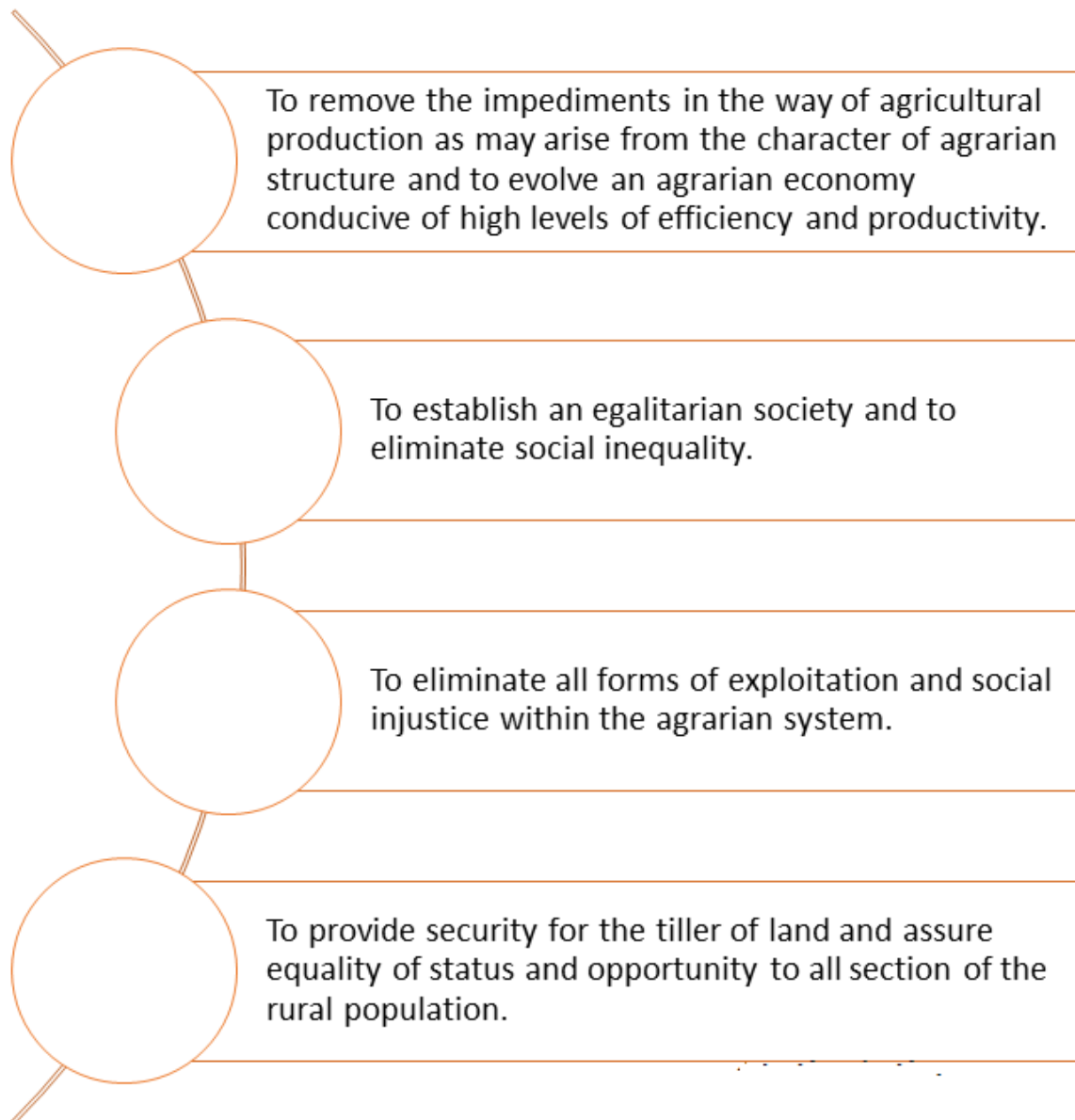
The Objectives of Land Reforms in India were:



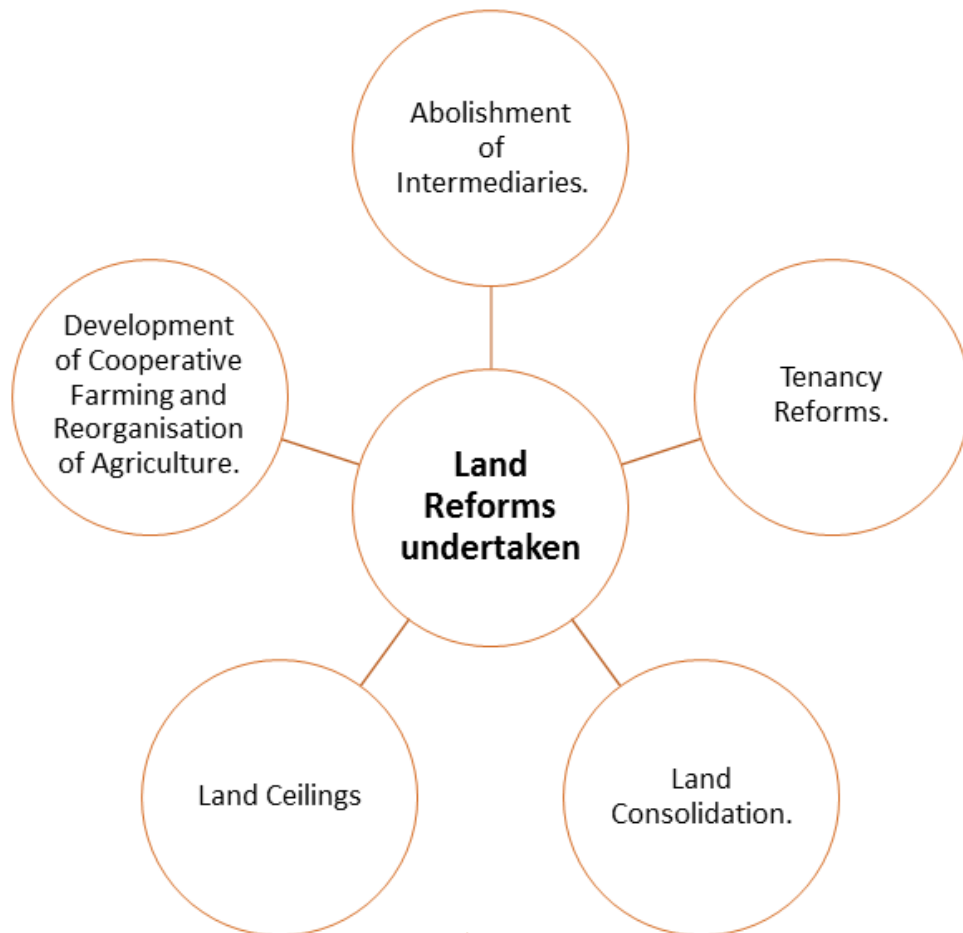
After Independence, attempts had been made to alter the pattern of distribution of land holdings based on four types of experiments.



The Government over the years defined the aim of land reforms to cover the following:



The land reforms legislations passed/undertaken by all the state governments mainly covers and converges to the common themes/measures of the following:



Abolishment of Intermediaries

1. It was widely recognised that the main cause of stagnation in the agriculture economy was to a large extent due to exploitative agrarian relations.
2. The Chief instrument of the exploitation were the intermediaries like Zamindars, patronised and promoted by the British government.
3. About 60% of the area under cultivation was under the Zamindari system on the eve of the Independence. The States

took the task of abolishing the intermediaries like Zamindars by passing the legislations.

4. The government estimates state that in total during first four Five years Plan, 173 million acres of land was acquired from the intermediaries and two crores tenants were given land to cultivate.
5. Abolition of intermediaries is generally agreed to be one component of land reforms that have been relatively successful. The record in terms of the other components is mixed and varies across states and over time. Landowners naturally resisted the implementation of these reforms by directly using their political clout and also by using various methods of evasion and coercion, which included registering their own land under names of different relatives to bypass the ceiling, and shuffling tenants around different plots of land, so that they would not acquire incumbency rights as stipulated in the tenancy law.
6. The success of land reform has been driven by the political will of specific state administrations, the notable achievers being the left-wing administrations in Kerala and West Bengal.

Tenancy Reforms

Tenancy reforms included the following set of measures:

- Regulation of rent
- Security of tenure
- Ownership rights of tenants

Tenants in India are classified into

- Occupancy Tenants: They enjoy permanent right over land and cannot be evicted easily.
- Tenants at will: They do not enjoy any right over land and can be evicted by the landlords anytime.

Therefore, to protect the tenants at will and subtenants, the tenancy reforms are passed by the various state governments.

Regulation of Rents: Under the British Government, the rents charged was highly exploitative with no sound economics behind it. These highly exploitative rents spelt high misery on the tenants and trapped them into vicious circles of debt and poverty.

To provide relief to the tenants from exploitative rents, the Indian government after independence passed legislations to regulate the rents (maximum limits on rent was fixed) and to reduce the miseries of the tenants.

Security of Tenure: To protect the tenants from arbitrary evictions and to grant them permanent rights over land, legislations had been passed in most states.

Legislations passed by the States has three essential aims; Evictions must not take place except in accordance with the provisions of law; Land may be resumed by the owner, if at all, for the “Personal Cultivation” only; In the event of land taken by the owner, the tenant is assured of a prescribed minimum area.

However, the vague definitions of Tenants Personal Cultivation and landowner under the law made it difficult to implement the tenancy reforms. The rights of resumptions provided in the law combined with the flaws in the definitions of the personal cultivation rendered all tenancies insecure.

Ownership Rights of Tenants: It has been repeatedly emphasised by the government, that the ownership rights of the land should be conferred to the actual cultivator. Accordingly, most states have passed legislations to transfer ownership rights to the tenants.

However, the success of the states in conferring the rights to the tenants varied widely. Some states like West Bengal, Kerala and Karnataka, has performed exceptionally well in this regard. In West Bengal due to the “**Operation Barga**” maximum sharecroppers were given ownership of land.

Land Ceilings

Land Ceiling on agriculture land means a statutory maximum limit on the quantity of land which an individual may hold. The imposition of the Land ceiling has two main aspects:

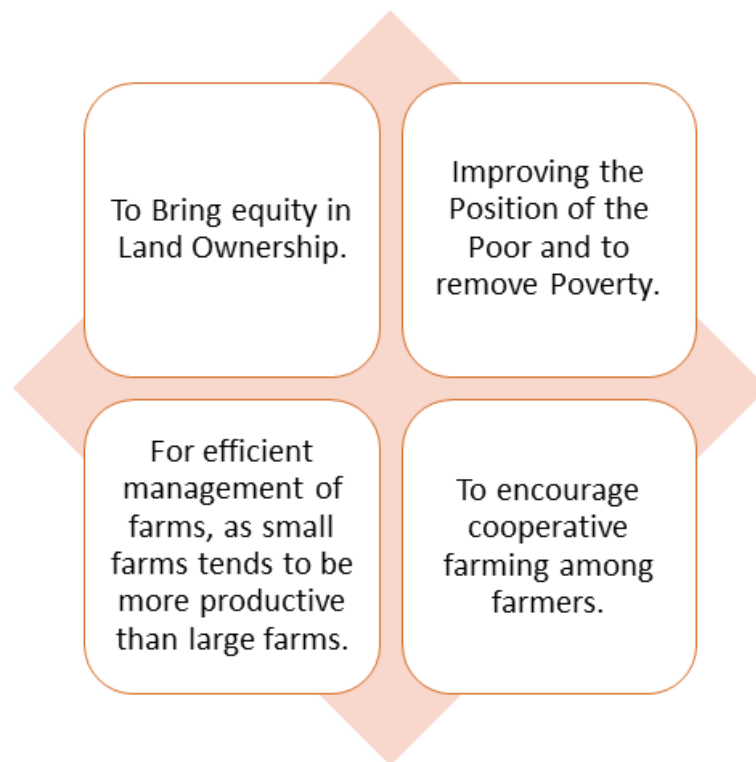
- Ceiling on future acquisitions.
- Ceilings on existing land holdings.

By 1961-62, ceiling legislation had been passed in all the States. The levels vary from State to State and are different for food and cash crops. In Uttar Pradesh and West Bengal, for example, the ceiling on existing holding is 40 acres and 25 acres. In Punjab, it ranges from 27 acres to 100 acres, in Rajasthan 22 acres to 236 acres and in Madhya Pradesh 25 acres to 75 acres.

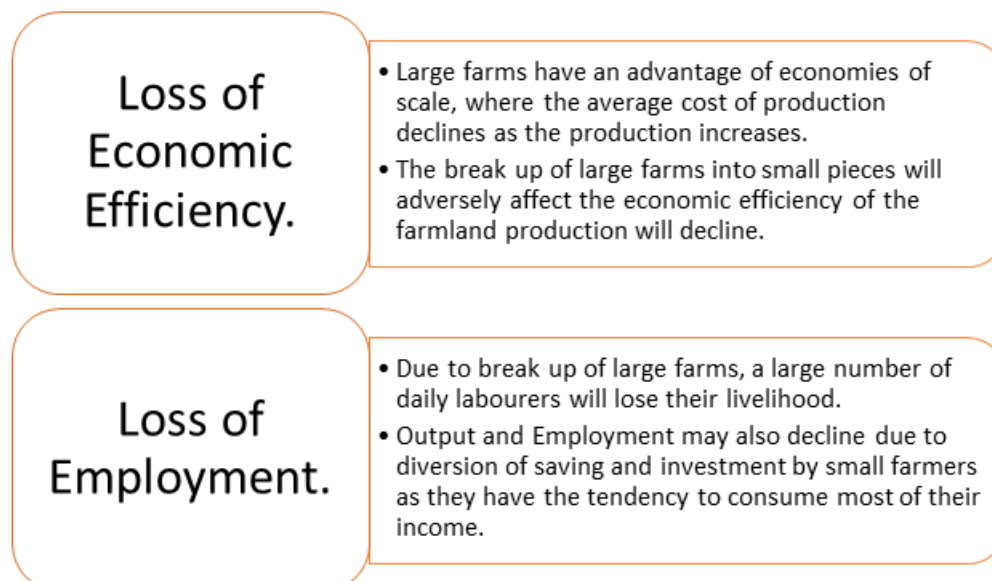
In order to bring about uniformity, a new policy was evolved in 1971. The main features were:

1. Lowering of ceiling to 28 acres of wetland and 54 acres of unirrigated land
2. Change over to the family rather than the individual as the unit for determining land holdings lowered ceiling for a family of five.
3. Fewer exemptions from ceilings.
4. Retrospective application of the law for declaring Benami transactions null and void,
5. No scope to move the court on the ground of infringement of fundamental rights.

Why was Land Ceiling needed?



The Argument against Land Ceiling



Land Consolidation

Land Consolidation means merging of multiple consolidated farms and giving it to each farmer. The measure is adopted to solve the problem of land fragmentation. The Land consolidation program required granting of one consolidated land to the farmer, which is equal to the total land holdings in different scatters under the farmer possession. It simply means instead of holding multiple small lands in different places; the farmer will be given a single big piece of land.

Why the Program Failed?

- The programme failed to achieve its desired objective because the farmers are reluctant to exchange their lands for the new one. The arguments given by the farmers is that their existing land is much more fertile and productive than the new land provided under land consolidation.
- The farmers also complained about nepotism and corruption in the process of consolidation. The farmers complained that the rich and influential often bribes and manage to get fertile and well-situated land, whereas the poor farmers get unfertile land.

Cooperative Farming

Cooperative farming is advocated to solve the problem of subdivisions of land holdings. The idea was to make farming profitable for small and marginal farmers having small pieces of land.

Under Cooperative Farming setup farmers having very small holdings come together and join hands to pool their lands for the purpose of cultivation. Pooling of farms helps in increasing production, and the farmers can have more produce to sell in the markets after taking out their subsistence need.

Cooperative farming also helps in mechanisation of agriculture as the owner of the multiple small farms can pool their money to buy a mechanical tractor or other equipment's which they could not afford otherwise.