

The Congress and the Abolition of Zamindari in Uttar Pradesh

Journal of South Asian Studies, 1985, 8:1-2, 154-167

PETER REEVES, Associate Director, Arts, Education and Social Sciences, Western Australian Institute of Technology.

It is widely recognised that zamindari abolition in Uttar Pradesh was not a revolutionary measure; that it was designed to bolster well-entrenched agrarian interests; and that it did little or nothing for the weakest sectors of UP rural society. Many have taken this outcome to be failure of the legislation to work as it was intended. This paper, on the contrary, sets out to show that the legislation reflected the dominant agrarian stance in the UP Congress very effectively; that from the outset Congress in UP was very hesitant about any commitment to abolition; and that the process by which the abolition measure was formulated allowed the views of those who wanted abolition to work to the interests of the small zamindar and substantial tenant to dictate the nature of the changes which were introduced.

1. The 1930s: abolition deferred

Congress agrarian policy in the 1920s was quite equivocal; in the 1930s it moved to align Congress with the interests of tenants and small zamindars. Although the UP Congress contained many of those who had been active in the earliest kisan sabhas, the statements of policy from the dominant Swarajist group at the time of the 1923 elections, for instance, were couched in terms that clearly went out of their way to re-assure the landowning classes:

True it is that the Party stands for justice to the tenant but poor indeed would be the quality of that justice if it involves any injustice to the landlord. The Party believes that it is only by serving the true interests of both that it can find a solid base for Swarajya and is pledged to stand by the one as firmly as the other in its hour of need.¹

By the late 1920s there were still expressions of this sort of 'class harmony' view but there were also challenges: leftist groups in Congress began to call for clearer lines of policy on economic and social matters. It was not until the Karachi session of the Congress, however, that there was a formal Congress policy on these matters:

The system of land tenure and revenue and rent shall be reformed and an equitable adjustment made of the burden on agricultural land, immediately giving relief to the small peasantry by a substantial reduction of agricultural rent and revenue now paid by them, and in case of uneconomic holdings, exempting them from rent, so long as necessary, with such relief as may be just and necessary, to holders of small estates affected by such exemption or reduction in rent, and to the same end, imposing a graded tax on income from land above a reasonable minimum.²

Such mild reform programmes did not satisfy left-wing aspirations. The Congress Socialist Party which met for the first time in Bombay on 21-22 October 1934 posted a much more radical socio-economic programme. Its 'Objectives' included the 'elimination of princes and landlords . . . without compensation'; 'redistribution of land to peasants'; and the 'encouragement of cooperative and collective farming by the State'.³ These policies helped to stir Congress to greater activity. The 49th Congress session at Lucknow in March 1936 decided that all provinces should commission special reports on agrarian reforms which could be considered by a Congress session later in the year. In August the Congress election manifesto re-affirmed the Karachi programme of reforms in tenure, revenue and rent. Then, at the end of the year, at the Faizpur Congress session, the Agrarian Reforms Enquiry Committee reports produced a more comprehensive agrarian resolution — the 'Faizpur Programme' — than Congress had published up to that time. This committed Congress to the ultimate goal of 'a radical change in the antiquated and repressive land tenure and revenue system', although for the moment it still looked to reformist policies of rent and revenue 're-adjustment', exemption of uneconomic holdings from land tax and the abolition of feudal dues.⁴

Faizpur, in fact, revealed the difficulties of Congress agrarian policy-making. Congress could not spell out a clear policy for future reform because there had been no resolution within Congress of the important issues that such a change entailed. Should estate-holders get compensation or not? Should there be any private rights in land in the future or should all land be vested in the State? What should be the nature of agricultural production in the future: peasant proprietorship? cooperative farming? or collective farming? The UP Agrarian Reforms Enquiry Committee's report highlighted the problem. In its final chapter, the report claimed that 'radical remedies are required, involving fundamental changes in our land system'; but it left others to determine how this would be done.

The abolition of the zamindari system will have to take place in India, as in other countries, sooner or later. How it will take place will depend on the circumstances then existing and it is a little difficult to lay down hard and fast rules as to what should happen when such a contingency arises. We should like this changeover to take place with as little injury as possible to various groups. Conflict is inevitably an expensive process and it is always desirable to lessen conflict. Some of us are clearly of opinion that compensation be given to the expropriated zamindars, some other members of our committee are opposed to this idea of giving compensation. This is a question which does not immediately arise for decision. As

we have indicated above, it will depend on many factors and circumstances and we, as a committee, do not feel called upon to discuss this matter in any detail. We have indicated, however, that both the views, for and against compensation, are represented in our committee. If the Provincial Congress Committee or its Council so choose, they can discuss the matter on the basis of the material supplied by us and come to some conclusion in regard to it, or may postpone further consideration of the issue. There is another point on which there is a difference of opinion among the members of the Committee. Some of us are in favour of peasant proprietorship of land, while others stand for the principle of State ownership.⁵

The main dissident, the socialist, Sampurnanand, underlined the strength of these differences on the committee in a note of reservation in which he insisted on 'social ownership of land and produce' through collective farming as the ultimate goal.⁶

The Congress election manifesto for the 1937 elections thus went no further than the Karachi programme of six years before. It promised a reform of the system of land tenure and revenue and rent and an equitable adjustment of the burden on agricultural land, giving immediate relief to the smaller peasantry by a substantial reduction of agricultural rent and revenue now paid by them and exempting uneconomic holdings from payment of rent and revenue.⁷

And the Congress ministry which assumed office in 1937 after these elections worked from these premises. It drew up plans for reform legislation conscious, it said, of the need 'to fulfill the great promises we have held out to the people'.⁸ Its approach was a very cautious one and the Tenancy Act which finally emerged in late 1939 made no claims to be revolutionary. The fact that section 299 of the Government of India Act of 1935 made the previous sanction of the Governor necessary for any Bill which attempted to abolish or modify the zamindari system, was a major reason for this. In addition, the ministry felt a need to walk very carefully between the zamindari interests in Congress and the leftist elements who wanted the ministry to move quickly to enact the entire programme of the 1936 report and the election manifesto.

The Tenancy Act in fact broke new ground. It combined the legislation for Agra and Oudh for the first time and so decreased the Oudh taluqdars' privileged position in the agrarian system. More important still, it introduced a new distinction between 'large' and 'small' landholders and drew a more effective boundary around the smaller zamindars (those paying less than Rs. 250 p.a.),⁹ whose support was more clearly with Congress, and whose interests Congress could protect at the same time as it attacked the larger landlords. And the Act did, in fact, take away some of the gains which the large land-holders had been able to make in the 1920s, particularly with regard to the acquisition of additional *sir* and *khudkasht* lands. Nonetheless, the legislation could be greeted with relief by the Governor, Sir Harry Haig. It enabled the ministry, he told Lord Hailey, 'to liquidate their election promises . . . without either the agrarian revolution foretold by many or the destruction of the zamindari system'.¹⁰ One disappointed pro-Congress source summed it up even more incisively: 'more moderate than the very moderate Faizpur programme'.¹¹

II. Slowing down abolition: Govind Ballabh Pant's role.

The UP elections of 1945-46 were primarily a battle for the allegiance of the Muslim electorate; and while Congress won power in the province, the Muslim verdict went overwhelmingly to the Muslim League and 'Pakistan'.¹²

Abolition of zamindari was an issue in those elections because Congress and Nationalist Muslim candidates used zamindari abolition as their main electoral appeal. The Muslim masses, Congress argued, would be better served by the Congress, which looked to the reform of the basic socio-economic problems of the masses, than by the Muslim League, which represented the voice of reactionary privilege and vested interests. Congress spokesmen lost no time in injecting the abolition slogan into the campaign while the Congress flagship, the *National Herald*, stressed the commitment to abolition.

'Every peasant can rest assured', it maintained, 'that the moment Congress assumes full power, it will not hesitate to introduce the most revolutionary changes in the land system of the country'.¹³ The paper's editorial on the eve of the elections underlined the significance of the proposals:

Responsible leaders of the Congress in this province, who held office before and who will be in office tomorrow, have given implicit assurances to the electorate that they will, at the first chance that offers, abolish the zamindari system. The Muslims of Agra and Oudh live on land in the villages. They are small artisans as well. Their economic interests are identical with the economic interests of the Non-Muslim masses. What have they to do with the rich taluqdars and zamindars of the community? Ghastly poverty and age-long tyranny divide them as nothing else can divide them from the Nanparas and the Mahmudabads . . . It is only a Congress government . . . that can strike an effective blow at the zamindars.¹⁴

Despite such clear words there were signs that an early move to abolition was not a foregone conclusion. Govind Ballabh

Pant's new ministry came into office in April 1946 with a general understanding that it would be a reforming ministry and that in those reforms, agrarian questions would have priority. In the first weeks of April, even before the Cabinet met, there were announcements of the staying of ejection orders against tenants and of plans for food procurement and *gaon panchayats*. Abolition, however, did not figure immediately in the ministry's programme. Pant himself seemed to play down the issue. 'Even if the Government, at any stage, thought of doing away with the zamindari system', he said in May, they would only be thinking of 'the good and well-being of the zamindars themselves'. There was 'no personal animosity' against zamindars on the part of Congress.¹⁵

If Pant was prepared to take his time, however, there were forces within the Congress which were not. On 13 May 1946 an unofficial resolution, which had been foreshadowed at the opening session of the Assembly, was tabled by Ajit Prasad Jain.¹⁶ The new social climate, Ajit Prasad maintained, dictated that the zamindari system should be wiped out with 'all possible speed'. The Congress had traded on this mood and the peasantry had rewarded them with its support 'and is now restlessly awaiting the enforcement of the practical steps to achieve the end of the zamindari system in the United Provinces'. He suggested a committee of sixteen members to determine what interests should be acquired, what compensation should be paid and what special machinery might be necessary for handling the acquisition of intermediaries' interests.

The ministry made no move. In May it set up a committee to consider the amendment of the Tenancy Act of 1939 and made Ajit Prasad the chairman. It followed this in July with ordinances against *nazrana* and illegal cesses. Both these were moves which the *National Herald* thought useful, but limited. Only the 'extinction' of vested interests in land would meet the needs of the situation, it insisted.

The election has been largely won by Congress on the kisan vote and the kisans should now get a fair deal. There is an increasing tendency for the Congress in this province to go leftist in the propagation of economic theories and enforcement of radical economic policies. The pressure therefore comes from outside the legislature and from the bottom inside the Congress itself.¹⁷

Not until 19 July 1946 did the government, still reportedly not anxious to take 'spectacular steps for the abolition of zamindari',¹⁸ decide to take the initiative. The official resolution which was tabled then read:

This assembly accepts the principle of the abolition of the zamindari system in this province, which involves various intermediaries between the cultivators and the State, and resolves that the rights of such intermediaries should be acquired on payment of equitable compensation, and that the Government should appoint a committee to prepare a scheme for this purpose.¹⁹

The resolution was carried, following Muslim League and landlord walk outs, amid cries of 'Down with zamindari'. The next day the *National Herald* claimed that the first step had been taken in a 'far-reaching revolution'.²⁰

The UP government certainly did not take that step any too quickly. It did not name the members of the UP Zamindari Abolition Committee until 8 October and the Committee was not called together until mid-November 1946. And its deliberations then stretched over two years, up to October 1948. In that period, any attempts to formulate a radical abolition policy were steadily eroded — as the earlier thrust had been — by Govind Ballabh Pant's authority in the Committee.

The crucial meetings of the committee, in October 1947, when decisions on the tenure system were taken, illustrated this.²¹ In those decisions, Govind Ballabh Pant, the chairman of the Committee, exercised a decisive influence. It was significantly, the one occasion on which he took a full part in the committee's deliberations. Usually he left the work of the committee to his subordinates, Hukum Singh, the Revenue Minister, Charan Singh and Jagan Prasad Rawat, the parliamentary secretaries, and B.N. Jha, the Revenue (and, later Chief) Secretary. The key leftist members of the Committee, Ajit Prasad Jain and Vishambhar Dayal Tripathi, were keen to get the committee to accept a scheme in which cooperative farming would replace individual cultivation entirely and in which the whole village community would exercise control over the land of the resultant cooperative farm. Such a proposal was what they and the left wing wanted to see. It was, however, too radical a plan for Govind Ballabh Pant. At the same time, he was not prepared to go the whole way with 'peasant proprietorship', the major rival proposal for the new tenure scheme. Charan Singh, the chief protagonist for peasant proprietorship on the committee, had rehearsed the arguments in his *Abolition of Zamindari. Two Alternatives*, published in early 1947. This was a major attempt by Charan Singh to push the committee towards a tenure system based on individual property rights and in which control of the village lands would be firmly in the hands of the landholding villages.

Pant wanted the whole village community to have control of the village lands. He specifically wanted the community to control and manage the waste lands of the village which were important for grazing and as a possible area for the extension of cultivation in the future. He also wanted the community to have pre-emptive rights over land so as to prevent the sale of land to those who did not reside in the village. Within that system of community control he then insisted on a *hissadari* system in which each individual cultivator (*hissadar*) retained his right to his holding and retained the right to cultivate it separately until such time as cooperative farming became the acceptable pattern. *Hissadars* would have some restrictions placed on their rights to transfer holdings and small (i.e., less than 10 acre) holdings were to be impartible; the order of succession to holdings was to be laid down in the legislation; and sub-letting was to be disallowed. But each *hissadar* would

be entered as a proprietor in the *khewat*, rather than as a cultivator in the *khatauni*, and each would pay revenue directly to the State.

This proposal for a *hissadari* system was accepted by the majority of the committee on 10 October 1947 and, despite protests by Ajit Prasad and Vishambhar Dayal at the meeting on 11 October, it remained the recommendation of the committee. The *National Herald* reported at this point that the committee had concluded its deliberations and that the legislation for zamindari abolition could be expected in early 1948.

In fact it was October 1948 before the report itself appeared and many, even Congress supporters, began to wonder at the delay. Even the *National Herald* was anxious. It feared that abolition might be put into 'cold storage' as the committee 'sank into a kind of permanent department of the government'.²² It urged the government to move 'at top speed'. In late May it defended the Congress record and intentions, but it then also published the first of the strongly-argued critiques of the abolition moves written by Professor Vir Bahadur Singh of Lucknow under the now-de-plume of 'Shekhar'. This first article carried the title: 'Zamindari Abolition — a farce or reality?'. Shekhar favoured sweeping elimination of all landlords, the subsequent nationalisation of land and the introduction of mechanised collective farming and he damned as quite inadequate the proposals which he expected the Pant-led committee to make. 'One is forced to draw the conclusion', he wrote, that landlordism is not being abolished but the zamindari system is being replaced by new forms of landlordism. The land hunger, the symptom of acute agrarian crisis, is left intact and the insolvent rack-rented undersized 95 per cent peasants do not draw any benefit from this abolition scheme. Politically it is a device to extend and stabilise the social base of the present government for getting votes in the next elections. Economically it will create a new class of rural bourgeoisie who will exploit the peasants and other sections of the rural population in a much more intense form.²³

III. The Committee's scheme: abolition watered-down

The Zamindari Abolition Committee's Report was then presented by the chairman, Govind Ballabh Pant, at a press conference on 7 October. The Report was not looked to for a decision on abolition as such. Abolition had been accepted by the Legislative Assembly in the resolution of 8 August 1946 and the terms of reference for the Committee had underlined this. The Committee had to determine not *whether* but *how* to abolish zamindari.

Many thought that the Committee would produce, nonetheless, a complete re-structuring of rural society. In fact, its purpose was much more limited. The Committee was concerned with the two-edged task of effectively undermining the position of the larger landlords while strengthening politically and economically the position of the smaller zamindars and the tenants, the groups which had become the main basis of the Congress position in the countryside. As Charan Singh wrote in his *Abolition of Zamindari* in 1947, the Congress, in talking about abolition, was not talking about nationalisation of land or the abolition of private property in land. The manifesto of 1945-46, he explained, 'does not seek the elimination of the zamindar who is not a landlord'. In the Punjab, Rajasthan and Western parts of UP, zamindars were merely holders of land and tillers of the soil in their ownership. 'Abolition of Zamindari simply means, and ought to mean, abolition of the landlord-tenant system, and no more'.²⁴ The Committee, on this basis, was charged with the task of enunciating the principles on which to base an abolition scheme which would make possible, simultaneously, the elimination of the landlord as a controller of tenants and the enhancement of the position of the 'peasantry' — i.e., those in effective control of cultivation.

The essential basis of the Committee's work then derived from the definition of cultivation which it adopted. This emphasized the managerial and financial aspects of cultivation at the expense of actual labour on land, a definition which had the advantage (for the Congress) of not excluding from the category of cultivators those small land-lords and tenants who had their land worked by hired labour and who did not themselves take part in manual operations. Of the four functions of cultivation which the Committee distinguished (manual labour, financing, management-supervision, and risk-taking in production) it saw the first as the least necessary.

While the ideal is that the cultivator and his family should contribute most of the labour required, a person who hires agricultural labour either permanently or casually for the performance of all or some manual tasks, must still be regarded as a 'tiller of the soil', provided that he finances and supervises agricultural production and takes the risks involved.²⁵

Along with this definition of cultivation, the Committee took another very basic decision which gave zamindari abolition a very particular shape. This was the decision that redistribution of land was impracticable and that, therefore, 'everyone in cultivatory possession should be allowed to retain his whole area'.²⁶ Abolition, on this basis, became fairly straightforward: identify the cultivator (as already defined) and confirm him in that position with secure rights by eliminating the right of any other person which interposed between the cultivator and the State. Thus zamindars (of whatever 'size') would retain their *sir* and *khudkasht*, and their grovelands, since in all of these types of land they were the "cultivators"; and tenants-in-chief would retain the land which they now held from any zamindar or other intermediary, all rights of the zamindar having been extinguished. All cultivators (ex-zamindars and ex-tenants) would then have a uniform heritable and permanent tenure as *panch hissadars* (literally, the holders of *hissa*, a share, in the village) and all would pay revenue for their holdings directly to the State. The Committee recommended that revenue should be made as equitable as possible and that efforts should be made to reduce disparities between different classes of rents. It proposed a scheme for the reduction of existing rents of

uneconomic holdings and a further scheme for the graduation of land revenue in favour of smaller holdings; but it categorically ruled out the exemption of any holding, even an uneconomic one, from land revenue.

All *hissadars* in a village were to be members of the *sanyukt hissadari* (essentially, a council of landholders) which would be responsible for collecting land revenue. For the overall management of the village there was to be a *gaon panchayat* which would comprise all cultivators and non-cultivators in the village. Any former zamindari rights to waste lands, paths, etc. would then be vested in the panchayat which would have the power to lease out such lands.

The acceptance of the *hissadari* system was essentially the acceptance of peasant proprietorship, although, in the decisions concerning the functions and powers of the *sanyukt hissadari/gaon panchayat*, the Committee turned down proposals by Charan Singh which would have given the *hissadars* effective control of the management of the village at the expense of other residents. The Committee looked for the development of cooperative institutions in the village but it saw this as a long-term aim. What it did rule out from the start were forms of large-scale farming — whether through capitalist farming, collectivisation or the development of state farms — and along with them ideas of increased mechanisation of agriculture. It looked to a decentralised rural economy in which the village community — based on a stable cultivating class with a uniform tenure base — would be the essential unit.

The Committee accepted that it was essential to compensate the zamindars for those rights over lands, forest produce and *sayar* produce which were being 'acquired'; and this meant as a corollary that *sir*, *khudkasht* and groveland were excluded for purposes of the calculation of compensation since these lands were being retained by the zamindar.²⁷ The compensation which it recommended was to be based on the net assets of the zamindar; i.e., the gross income from rents for the lands in question, plus an average for income from forest and *sayar* produce, minus the land revenue, cesses and 15% for management costs. The Committee also accepted that the compensation to be paid had to take account, on the one hand, of the size of the zamindar and hence his capacity to adjust to the new situation, and on the other hand, of the financial capacity of the State and with due consideration of the effect which payment at once in cash would have on inflation and related aspects of financial and currency management. The Committee's view was that the obvious source for compensation which would meet these requirements was the net additional land revenue available to the State after abolition.

The compensation scheme which emerged from these considerations was as follows: (1) there was to be a graduated scale of compensation which would help both to soften the blow to the smaller zamindars and provide some check on payments to the largest landlords; (2) the compensation due was to be payable over 40 years at 2% p.a. interest; (3) those paying up to Rs2,000 p.a. in land revenue would be paid entirely in negotiable bonds while those who paid more than Rs2,000 p.a. in land revenue would receive half in negotiable bonds and half as fixed deposit in a cooperative bank. As further assistance to zamindars, the Committee recommended that debts secured on land be scaled down in the same proportion as the compensation received bore to the market value of the land. It also recommended various checks which would prevent attempts by zamindars to inflate their compensation claims.

The *National Herald* was disappointed with many aspects of the report. 'The situation presents revolutionary possibilities but it has to be accepted that neither the government nor the people are in a revolutionary mood', it wrote 'in the first of a series of editorials on the *Report*.* By the time it had reached the end of its series, however, the *National Herald* was less inclined to shield the report: 'It is apparent that there are serious weaknesses, besides an undercurrent of coldness, in the report'; it contained no 'rousing call to reform'.²⁹

Shekhar used the *National Herald's* columns for a much more bitter attack. The abolition scheme, he charged, was actually intended to soften the blow to the landlords; the lack of land redistribution was intended 'for keeping untouched the rural vested interests in the new set-up' and the installation of the proposed village communities meant that 'the power and influence of the zamindars will not disappear overnight and therefore will dominate the village panchayats'.³⁰

Govind Ballabh Pant himself seemed to underline this softening of the blow. For him, abolition was an 'ethical necessity'. 'With all the sympathy we may feel for the zamindars, we are convinced that there can be no escape from the abolition of the feudal system'. Anyway, he maintained, only 390 big landlords would be really affected; and those were 'the big zamindars who controlled long purses and wagged long tongues'.³¹

IV. Abolition re-shaped: Charan Singh's contribution.

The drafting, discussion and enactment of the abolition legislation took a further two and a quarter years following the release of the Zamindari Abolition Committee's *Report*. It was in this stage of the process that Charan Singh — to whom the Chief Minister entrusted the drafting of the Bill — left his mark on the abolition scheme.

Pant expected that the drafting would be completed by January 1949. In fact it took until June 1949 and, even so, a period of concentrated activity in May 1949 was required to get the Bill through the Cabinet. This period of activity, from 12-17

May, became for the press 'Zamindari Abolition Week': Cabinet spent each afternoon for six days discussing material prepared each morning by a 'chhota cabinet' led by Charan Singh. In all, there were some 40 hours of cabinet discussion devoted to the Bill.

As it emerged from these discussions, the Bill had several new features. Firstly, a two-tier tenure pattern (*bhumidhari* and *sirdari* tenures) linked to Charan Singh's Zamindari Abolition Fund scheme had been put in place of the Zamindari Abolition Committee's *hissadari* scheme. Secondly, in order to avoid constitutional difficulties over compensation payments, provision had been made for a flat rate of compensation to all intermediaries (that rate to be eight times the net assets of the land acquired) with an additional graduated 'rehabilitation grant' being paid to intermediaries paying less than Rs.5,000 land revenue. And thirdly, the way had been opened for tenants of *sir* and *khudkasht*, and sub-tenants, all of whom the *Report* would have evicted, to acquire tenure rights.

The Zamindari Abolition Fund, which was the key to this final transformation of the abolition scheme, was Charan Singh's idea. The *National Herald* reported it as 'Pant's master stroke' but it is clear that it was devised by Charan Singh. As early as 1939 he had drawn up a similar scheme as the basis for a new form of peasant proprietorship in UP and in his *Abolition of Zamindari* in 1947 he outlined the principles of the Fund as a means of raising the compensation necessary for abolition to be carried out, although this was overlooked by commentators at the time.³² His decisive move, in terms of having the Fund idea adopted as part of the abolition plan, followed immediately on the publication of the Zamindari Abolition Committee's *Report*. Given his disagreement with the views of some members of the Committee, Charan Singh contemplated writing a minute of dissent but he finally decided that he was not justified in doing this because of what he later described as his 'lowly status' as a Parliamentary Secretary. Instead, and more effectively, he presented Pant with a long and detailed memorandum on 18 October 1948.³³ In this he outlined his objections to those aspects of the *Report* which he saw as working against a future agrarian economy based on small-peasant production and pressed very strongly for compensation funds to be provided by the tenants themselves and not the State.

It was this memorandum that led Pant to give Charan Singh the task of drafting the legislation. The Zamindari Abolition Fund, which was announced in March 1949, was thus brought firmly into the scheme. When the draft Bill came to Cabinet in May 1949, the Fund had already been given an operational basis by the allocation of Rs. 1 crore from 'budget surplus'.³⁴ This provided the initial capital for the Fund, to which the tenants' contributions were to be added. Those contributions then made possible the two new secure tenures provided in the Bill - *bhumidhari* and *sirdari*. *Bhumidhari*, the more valuable tenure, was for ex-intermediaries in their personally-cultivated lands, in the first instance. Ex-tenants were to be *sirdars* in the holdings which became their after abolition and, as *sirdars*, they would continue to pay, as revenue to the State, the sum which they had previously paid for those lands as rent to the landlord. Under the scheme now put forward, a *sirdar* could acquire *bhumidhari* status in his land, and with it a 50 per cent reduction in land revenue, by depositing ten times the annual rent for that land with the Zamindari Abolition Fund.

This scheme was put forward, and was accepted, as having great advantages for the government. Charan Singh, and others, saw compensation posing problems from the outset. There were, of course, some who believed that no compensation was due to the landlords and who resented, therefore, any payments at all, but this view never had much support. More pressing were the views of those who argued that compensation on the scale envisaged threatened the practical application of the scheme. Such critics argued that the sum needed was so large — about Rs.140 crores — that compensation on the scale envisaged would absorb virtually the entire additional revenue which the State was to gain by taking over the rental receipts of the former landlords, thus making it impossible for the State to devote any additional funds to the agricultural and rural developments which were seen as an integral part of the abolition scheme. Also there were fears that releasing large amounts of compensation money into the rural areas would exacerbate the already difficult inflationary situation caused by the rapid expansion of the money supply over the war years.

The Zamindari Abolition Fund seemed to be able, on the one hand, to meet these financial problems; to "show the way out" as Charan Singh put it. It would save the Government's finances (since he expected that 80 per cent of the tenants would be able to subscribe the necessary amount "cash down") while effectively 'mopping up' much of the money supply. On the other hand, the scheme had the important additional benefit that it would bring, in Charan Singh's words, more "satisfaction" to the tenants. Specifically, it would provide a way in which tenants with more than 10 acres (who otherwise would not have been eligible for any rental reduction) could have an opportunity to halve rent payments.

It could be argued, in fact, that what was really at stake was the Government's links with the better-off tenants; those with more than 10 acres, that is, often with occupancy rights and probably those who had gained from the inflated prices of the war years. They could be seen as likely to be most dissatisfied with a "reform" situation which did not bring them any reduction of rent after the promises which had been made to them since the 1930s. This concern to ensure some direct financial benefit for the larger tenants can be compared to the decision to give rehabilitation grants to smaller zamindars (initially regarded as those paying less than Rs.5,000 land revenue per annum but later extended to those paying less than Rs. 10,000 p.a.) as a means of reassuring those from whom Congress looked to gain support after abolition was carried through. There was also perhaps a point in the claim made by the landlord leader, Sir Jagdish Prasad, that *bhumidhari* was a way of getting the *bhumidhar* to pledge his support for Congress in the first elections under the new constitution 'for fear of losing the money which he had deposited to become a *bhumidhar*'.³⁵

The collections for the Fund began in late 1949. Although the ZA Bill was only at the Select Committee stage, the Government moved to legislate for an immediate start to contributions to the Fund. The UP Agricultural Tenants (Acquisition of Privileges) Act, X of 1949, which received the Governor's assent on 10 August 1949, provided for Voluntary payments by the general body of tenants of ten times their annual rents. Upon such payments they will be entitled to a reduction of their rents by half and will enjoy complete protection from ejection on any ground whatsoever. The balance of their rent will be paid to the State Government. This will in effect give them immediately the substance of *bhumidhari* rights as contemplated under the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Bill, 1949, and as soon as zamindari is abolished, they will be entitled to a formal declaration of their status.

Organisation for the collections was put in hand in late August. Initially, it was announced that the scheme would be inaugurated on 2 October but by September collection was already said to be in full swing.

By late October reports on the effectiveness of the drive for contributions to the Fund were contradictory. The *Pioneer* reported that the Fund was in trouble and that Charan Singh was sending out 'a strongly worded note' to Congress MLAs urging them to increase their support for the scheme.³⁶ A total of Rs.1.65 crores was reported as being subscribed by early November; and it was argued that any shortfall was due to the fact that 'being the harvesting and sowing season the tenant does not at present possess the full amount to deposit in the fund, but soon he will be in a position to do so.'³⁷ Both Pant and Charan Singh reiterated their confidence in the scheme; but they also emphasized that zamindari abolition would go ahead — it was a 'settled fact' Charan Singh insisted — even if the Fund was not fully subscribed. Pant took the line that if the Zamindari Abolition Fund was not adequate to the purpose, compensation would be paid in bonds.³⁸

The reports of difficulties continued, however, and Charan Singh found himself the subject of increasingly hostile criticism for the over-optimistic claims regarding the availability of currency in the countryside. 'It seems', commented Shekhar wryly, 'that the fund drive was launched without examining the financial aspects of the rural economy'.³⁹ The Government itself seemed to admit this by that time. At the turn of the year, the deadline for contributions was extended until 28 February 1950 in order to allow funds from the new season's sugarcane harvest to be drawn into the Fund.⁴⁰

At the beginning of June 1950 it was reported that collections totaled Rs.19,03,56,185; that 20,16,420 *bhumidhari* declaration had been issued; but it was also admitted that only 7 of the 48 districts of the province had exceeded 20 per cent of the target figure laid down for them. In the face of these reports the Government decided to offer incentives to officials and panchayats engaged in Zamindari Abolition Fund work.⁴¹ The Congress Legislature Party decided to allow acquisition after the Bill came into force (at the slightly higher rate of 11 times the annual rent) and to allow the payment of contributions to the fund by installments (calculated on the still higher rate of 12 times the annual rent); but these plans had to be shelved for the time being because of administrative difficulties.⁴² In fact, provision was included in sec.134 of Act I of 1950 for the continuing acquisition of *bhumidhari* rights by *sirdars*, subject only to the right of the Government to give three months notice at the end of the procedure.

The Zamindari Abolition Fund provided the government with less than a quarter of its compensation funds and, in the end, a bond issue became necessary.⁴³ But its real purpose had been realised: the tenure scheme of the abolition measure had been converted effectively to peasant proprietorship with a continuing procedure that accommodated upwardly-mobile peasants in the future and provided for the conversion of land to alienable status when required.⁴⁴ Charan Singh's political purpose had been effectively written into the scheme. His summing-up of what he chose to call 'agrarian revolution in Uttar Pradesh' indicates this:

The political consequences of the land reforms are no less far-reaching. Much thought was given to this matter since the drafters of the legislation were cognisant of the need to ensure political stability in the countryside. By strengthening the principle of private property where it was weakest, i.e. at the base of the social pyramid, the reforms have created a huge class of strong opponents of the class war ideology. By multiplying the number of independent land-owning peasants there came into being a middle of the road stable rural society and a barrier against political extremism. It is fair to conclude that an agrarian reform has taken the wind out of the sails of the disrupters of peace and the opponents of ordered progress.⁴⁵

The outcome

Continued inequality in landholding is evident in every measurement of holdings and agricultural operations made in UP since abolition. P.K. Tandon, working with Zamindari Abolition Committee figures for 1944-45 and the 8th Round of the National Sample Survey for 1953-54, compared the figures over that decade:⁴⁶

Holdings	1944-45	1953-54

(acres)	% persons	% land	% families	% land
0-1	37.8	6.00	35.38	2.27
1-5	81.2	38.80	75.70	31.01
25-	0.9	12.90	1.21	11.51

The officially-commissioned sample taken by Baljit Singh and Shridhar Misra in the early 1960's showed 33% of households (holding less than 3 acres) had 7% of the land of the sample villages, at one extreme, while 7.25% of the households (with 20 acres or more) had 34% of the land, at the other.⁴⁷ And figures from the Agricultural Census of 1970-71 show that the disparities have not diminished over time. Holdings of up to two hectares amounted to 84% of all 'operational holdings' but only 41.9% of land in UP at that time; whereas holdings of 10 or more hectares, representing only 0.7% of the total holdings, had nearly 10% of the land of the state.⁴⁸

This continued inequality was the result, in part, of the Committee's decision not to attempt to redistribute land. The notion of not disturbing 'cultivatory possession' left all 'cultivators', at the outset, just where they were. In fact, however, other developments during the late 1940's and early 1950's tended to enhance the position of those who already had sizeable units of land. These developments included the zamindars' evictions of smaller, less-secure tenants and those on marginal holdings; purchases from the poorer cultivators by the better-off; and the extension of cultivation by the larger cultivators. In the working-out of the abolition scheme, therefore, those who had gained in these ways were able to preserve much more for themselves by having these added areas under 'cultivatory possession'. In addition (and in some cases as an alternative) zamindars often concealed the true nature of their holdings by fictitious (*benami*) transfers of land. Elizabeth Whitcombe describes this process well and she shows how the administrative difficulties — particularly difficulties with *patwaris* and the burden of the compensation programme — of the time enabled the zamindars to get away with a great deal. By the time of abolition; 'a wholesale enlargement had taken place on innumerable estates' and the government, she argues, 'turned a blind eye to the aggrandizement which could not but take place under the head of "personal cultivation" with the record-keeping establishment so assiduously employed elsewhere'.⁴⁹

Revenue officers rarely ventured . . . into the thickets of multiple registration of title farmed out amongst brothers, uncles, absentees, servants, even elephants in the ex-zamindari stables. No legal restriction on the size of holdings existed prior to the passing of the ceilings act almost a decade after abolition, in 1960; a certain dilatoriness on the part of the legislators in this respect assisted ex-zamindari families to pool their resources in profitable harmony.⁵⁰

The result of these various evasions and manipulations of the system was the continued existence throughout the state of a well-ensconced; influential cultivator class, ex-zamindar or ex-taluqdar in some instances, ex-tenant in others. Thomas Metcalf, writing in the mid-1960's, pointed to the successful adjustment of the middle-sized taluqdars with capital resources and a viable basis for intensive cultivation in 'agro-industrial' complexes based on their former 'estates'.⁵¹ Whitcombe, in the late 1970s, highlights this with her detailed picture of 'Q Sahib' who had been able to fall back after abolition on the 30 acres of *sir* at the heart of his family's zamindari in 'district E' in the middle doab:⁵²

Two decades after abolition, the thirty-acre *ex-sir* was a showpiece: well-irrigated, amply fertilized and ablaze with hybrid vigour. Reduced in size but not in circumstances, the ex-estate, no more than a tenth of the old zamindari, brought in an estimated net annual income of Rs.6000, ten times the yield in the best years in Q. Sahib's father's time.

Twenty years before, Daniel Thorner had already pin-pointed the group, the *pakkahaveliwale*, who 'announced their good fortune to the rural world by building themselves large new houses, commonly with one or even two upper storeys from which they could look down on their neighbours'.⁵³ He pointed also to the result:

No matter what high-sounding policies may be announced at the Centre by the national leadership of the Congress Party, the carrying out of such policies has to be done, in the last analysis, at the State and district level. There the *pakkahaveliwale* stand in strength, quite capable of blocking or crippling any measure that runs counter to their interests. Now that the great absentee zamindars have been removed, the resident zamindars and big tenants have come up to take their place; today they strut around as lords of the land.⁵⁴

It is in these images of the outcome of reform that the true results of Congress's programme of zamindari abolition are to be seen.

NOTES

1. K.M. Panikkar and A. Pershad (ed), *The Voice of Freedom. The Speeches of Pandit Motilal Nehru* (Bombay, 1961), pp. 512-13.
2. P.D. Kaushik, *Congress Ideology and Programme* (Bombay, 1964), app. iv.
3. H.K. Singh, *The History of the Praja Socialist Party* (Lucknow, 1959) p. 237.
4. H.D. Malaviya, *Land Reforms in India* (New Delhi, 1955), pp. 63-65.
5. UP Congress Agrarian Enquiry Committee, *Report* (Lucknow, 1936), ch. vi, 'Recommendations', p. ii.
6. *Ibid.*, pp. xv-xvi.
7. Malviya, *Land Reforms*, pp. 65-66.
8. *Pioneer*, 25 July 1937, p. 1.
9. The Act of 1939 divided landholders in terms of local rates levied under the UP Local Rates Act, I of 1914; it aimed its *sir* provisions at those paying a local rate of Rs. 25 p.a. or more and this would normally indicate a land revenue payment of Rs.250 p.a.; see Q.A.A. Bilgrami, *An Analytical and Exhaustive Commentary on the UP Tenancy Act (XVII of 1939)* (Allahabad, 1950), p. 216.
10. Haig to Hailey, 13 March 1938, *Hailey Papers*, IOL, Eur. Mss E220, vi. 28.
11. *Indian Annual Register*, 1938, vol. I, p. 352.
12. For results see P.D. Reeves, B.D. Graham and J.M. Goodman, *A Handbook to Elections in Uttar Pradesh, 1920-1951* (Delhi, 1975), pp. 250-53, 320-62.
13. 'What the Congress wants to do for cultivators', *National Herald* (hereafter *NH*) 23 Dec 1945, p. 6.
14. 'The Elections', *NH*, 5 March 1946, p. 4.
15. *NH*, 1 May 1946, p. 6.
16. *NH*, 14 May 1946, p. 4.
17. 'Zamindari', *NH*, 15 May 1946, p. 4.
18. Report from Special Correspondent, Naini Tal, *Pioneer*, 21 May 1946, p. 1.
19. *NH*, 18 July 1946, p. 3; 20 July 1946, p. 1.
20. 'How to abolish zamindari', *NH*, 10 Aug 1946, p. 4.
21. This paragraph and the two following, are based on: UP Zamindari Abolition Committee, *Report* (Allahabad, 1948), vol. I, pp. 493-518 (for discussion of merits of peasant proprietorship and cooperative farming) and pp. 519-27 (for 'the new scheme of land tenure'); Minutes of the Zamindari Abolition Committee preserved in the file on the UP Zamindars' Union in the *Sir Jagdish Prasad papers*; and *NH*, 14 Oct 1947, p. 3.
22. 'Zamindari Abolition', *NH*, 22 April 1948, p. 4; 'Congress and the Zamindars', *NH*, 29 May 1948, p. 4.
23. *NH*, 8 June 1948, p. 4.
24. Charan Singh, *Abolition of Zamindari. Two Alternatives* (Allahabad, 1947), p. 131.
25. UP Zamindari Abolition Committee, *Report*, vol. I, p. 364.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 389.
27. *Ibid.*, chs. xv, xvi, xvii for compensation proposals, methods of payment and scaling down of debts.
28. 'Zamindari Abolition I', *NH*, 8 Oct 1948, p. 4.
29. 'Zamindari Abolition VII', *NH*, 17 Oct 1948, p. 4.
30. Shekhar, 'Whither Zamindari Abolition?, II: Redistribution of Land', *NH*, 21 Oct 1948, p. 4; and 'Whither Zamindari Abolition? IV: The Future Land Tenure', *NH*, 31 Oct 1948, p. 4.
31. *Pioneer*, 8 Oct 1948, p. 8.
32. *NH*, 1 March 1949, p. 3. See Charan Singh, *Abolition of Zamindari*, pp. 162 ff and his draft 'UP Land Utilization Bill' at pp. 255-63. In fact he had drafted the original idea in 1939; he published an article (in the *National Call?*) on 13 June 1939 entitled 'Peasant Proprietorship of Land to the Workers' and he drew up the 'UP Land Utilization Bill, 1939' with this as a key idea; these are in *Charan Singh papers*, file no. 112, 'Radio Talks, Notes, Articles and Pamphlets by Chaudhry Sahib, 13.6.39 -- Jan 1966 (with three folders)', items 1 & 2.
33. *Charan Singh papers*, file no. 112, item 10, 'A Note on Report of the Zamindari Abolition Committee submitted to the Hon'ble the Premier, UP, dated 18 Oct 1948'.
34. Charan Singh, 'Zamindari Abolition Fund', *NH*, 20 March 1949, magazine p. 1.
35. *Pioneer*, 22 Jan 1950, p. 4.
36. *Pioneer*, 27 Oct 1949, pp. 1 & 2.
37. *NH*, 9 Nov 1949, p. 3.
38. *NH*, 31 Oct 1949, p. 3; 19 Nov 1949, p. 3; 27 Nov 1949, p. 4.
39. Shekhar, 'The rural vote', *NH*, 25 Sept 1949, p. 4.
40. *NH*, 31 Dec 1949, p. 3; 1 Jan 1950, p. 3.
41. *NH*, 10 June 1950, p. 4.
42. *NH*, 9 June 1950, p. 3; *Pioneer*, 8 June 1950, p. 1.
43. See Baljit Singh & Shridhar Misra, *A Study of Land Reforms in Uttar Pradesh* (Honolulu, 1964), pp. 108-9.
44. See the interesting recent discussion of this point in C.J. Bliss and N.H. Stern, *Palanpur: the Economy of an Indian Village* (Delhi, 1982), pp. 18-19.

45. Charan Singh, *Agrarian Revolution in Uttar Pradesh* (1957), p. 41.
46. P.K. Tandon, 'Changes in landownership pattern in U.P.', *New Age*, vol. X, no. 1 (Jan. 1961), pp. 34-35.
47. Singh and Misra, *Study of Land Reforms*, p. 132. Note also their point that the average size of *bhumidhari* holdings was 10.5 acres and of *sirdari*, 6.1 acres.
48. Kripa Shankar (comp.), *Uttar Pradesh in Statistics* (Allahabad, 1978), table 19, 'Number and area of operational holdings by size category, 1970-71'. Francine R. Frankel, *India's Political Economy, 1947-1977* (Princeton, 1977), p. 493, footnote to table 12-1 notes that 'An operational holding includes all land used for agricultural production as part of the same technical and economic unit, regardless of title, size, or location'.
49. E. Whitcombe, 'Whatever happened to the zamindars?' in E.J. Hobsbawm *et al* (ed), *Peasants in History. Essays in Honour of Daniel Thorner* (Calcutta, 1980), p. 178.
50. *Ibid.*, pp. 178-79.
51. T.R. Metcalf, 'Landlords without land: the U.P. zamindars today', *Pacific Affairs*, vol. XI, no. 1 and 2 (Spring and Summer 1967), pp. 5-18.
52. Whitcombe, 'Whatever happened to the zamindars?', p. 159.
53. Daniel Thorner, *The Agrarian Prospect in India* (Delhi, 1956), p. 49.
54. *Ibid.*, p. 50.