

Land Reform and Co-operative Farming

The Janawasa Law passed by the National State Assembly marked another step in the country's recent agrarian reform. This law which provides for the registration of certain societies as Janawasas, and the establishment of a Janawasa Commission to register, regulate and supervise Janawasas is a significant move in the history of collective farming in Sri Lanka. This law marks a phase in the transition from private ownership to collective ownership and fostering of a collective management and development of agricultural land. This may be considered a progressive step towards socialized agriculture. Co-operative farming in this country is not a recent development. Attempts at co-operative farming date back to the early fifties when this system was tried out on settlement schemes in the dry zone. Such early attempts were introduced mainly among peasants from the wet zone who were settled in agricultural settlements in the dry zone. These did not meet with much success and had to be abandoned. A fresh attempt was then made in the mid and late sixties. This time it was among the employed youth who were settled in youth settlement schemes. Although ambitious plans were drawn up to establish 230 co-operative youth farms between 1966-70, only 43 were established during this period with a membership of 2,739 youths as against the target of 25,500.

Land Reforms

Co-operative farming reached new grounds following the Land Reform introduced in 1972. Provision was made under the Land Reform Law for the establishment of co-operative settlements (Janawasas). For this purpose a separate unit (co-operative settlement) was established within the Land Reform Commission. With humble beginnings in 1973 today Janawasas have grown considerably within a short span of three years, amounting to 183 in 14 districts, covering an acreage close to 50,000 and a membership of 18,000. In addition to the Janawasas there are also the Samupakara Gammanas (Co-operative farms under the Ministry of Agri-

culture) and the DDC Co-operative farms (under the Planning Ministry.) Thus co-operative farming today is a key component of the country's agricultural structure.

There is no doubt that co-operative farming is finally the only realistic way to safeguard the peasants from poverty, land, hunger, backwardness and oppression.

The ideal policy of allocating a viable holding to each peasant is not feasible in view of the limits on expansion of cultivable area and current population growth trends. The total cultivable area in the country is estimated to be around 10 mn. acres of which about 50 per cent is already under cultivation. A case has been argued for co-operative farming on technical grounds as well. For instance as Dr. Ernest Abeyratne, the Director of Agriculture emphasised:

"The basic choice before us is between environmentally unbalanced systems of small holdings, dictated by current social demands, with all the attendant difficulties of servicing and support and the more easily managed, large-scale, labour-intensive collective or co-operative systems which are environmentally stable".

In socialist countries co-operative farming is a political necessity and co-operative farms are in harmony with the rest of the economy. Co-operative farms are thus an inseparable part of a socialist economy and the co-operative transformation of agriculture is not just a question of organisation which can be carried through separated from the nature of the social order and character of state power.

Even in these countries the transformation of co-operative farms was a gradual process. In East Germany for instance, the transformation took place in about 15 years. Poland on the other hand, immediately after the war, started on a massive programme of collectivisation but subsequently decollectivized them and

today 80% of the land in Poland is under private ownership.

Co-operative settlements in Sri Lanka are just a segment of the agricultural sector of the country. Out of the total lands vested with the State following the Land Reform, only 7% of it has been alienated for co-operative settlements while over 20% of the lands vested have been redistributed as individual holdings to landless peasants.

While it is important that co-operative settlements are given a prominent place an equal amount of consideration must be given to organise production in the lands distributed as individual holdings. The mere redistribution of holdings to the landless should not be the sole objective and every effort should be taken to bring these lands under an appropriate production plan so that these would give the recipients a reasonable income and could make a major contribution to increase agricultural production of the country. Excessive attention on Janawasas could result in mutual jealousies and rivalry between the villages and estates which would also lead to problems in integrating the two.

Time for Assessment

In Sri Lanka collective farming is still in its embryonic stages. Although we do have many co-operative farms which are managed successfully we cannot yet say that Sri Lanka's experience in collectivisation is a complete success. There are many problems yet to be classified and it will be a long time before we could evolve a system based on our own ideologies.

This brings us to consider the present position of co-operative farming schemes in Sri Lanka. Is the time ripe for us to increase the number of co-operative farms? To what extent have Sri Lanka's co-operative farms been successful? Have we evolved a system based on our own ideologies and aspirations of the people? Thus it would be useful if we could now make a complete assessment of the co-operative farming system in Sri Lanka and identify its obstacles for its sustained growth before further expansion is made.