

November 29, 2004

States

Houses with garden plots for rural landless

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New Delhi The Union government appears to have accepted the recommendations of a US-based Rural Development Institute (RDI) to provide houses with garden plots to the rural landless.

Following the recommendations of the RDI, based in Seattle, the Union rural development minister, Raghuvansh Prasad Singh, has decided to reorient the existing central government scheme for providing rural housing to the poor, Indira Aawas Yojana (IAY). Wastelands are to be used for providing house-with-garden plots.

The RDI is a non-profit organisation of rural land law and policy experts, affiliated with the University of Washington School of Law. It conducted field studies in Bijapur, Kolar, Shimoga and Dakshina Kannada districts of Karnataka, and in West Bengal, on randomly-selected rural households to study the impact of land reforms. Their report says the state governments have used different schemes to allot homestead land for poor households. Some schemes are co-funded by the state and Union governments.

RDI has categorised ongoing schemes into three different categories: the rural housing ones, the land reforms programme and programmes to regularise unauthorised possession of land. On the basis of the study conducted in Karnataka, RDI suggested a practical and effective land reform alternative is to provide a house with a garden plot to the rural poor, enabling sustenance and livelihood.

The RDI report is against a comparative study of land reforms in more than 30 countries. The RDI study suggested the government either launch a new scheme, or revise the existing ones, to allot homestead and garden plots of at least 0.05 acre, or 2,178 sq. ft. to rural landless families. If need be, the plot size may go up to 0.15 acre. The legal rights to the homestead and garden plot should be in the joint name of wife and husband.

Strangely, no data of homeless rural poor is available with the Union government, despite the existence of several ongoing schemes for providing houses to them. A document of the Union rural development ministry admits: "This ministry does not have information about rural families who do not have house-sites in rural areas. Though a lot of ceiling surplus land and government wastelands were distributed to landless rural poor for agricultural purposes, many rural poor families are still not having adequate land for house sites."

It has asked the state governments to conduct a special drive to list eligible families and prepare a programme to allot homestead-cum-garden plots to landless rural families by the end of the current financial year.

Meanwhile the parliamentary standing committee on rural development, under the chairmanship of Kalyan Singh, is examining various aspects of rural housing. It has invited views from experts.