

# Land Reforms in Uttar Pradesh and the Pursuit of Sustainable Rural Development

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## Abstract

*Uttar Pradesh is a central state of Indian land reform; it is the first state in India to have eliminated intermediary tenures, the first to enact a land ceiling law and unique among the states in India in continuing to work on a programme of land consolidation. This review brings together the legal, economic and geographical literature on the subject of land reform in Uttar Pradesh, covering the abolition of zamindari, tenancy regulation, land ceiling and consolidation of holdings (chakbandi) with a look on how these developments have affected the efforts to achieve sustainable rural development in the state. The review acknowledges that land reform in Uttar Pradesh achieved a genuine, historically significant redistribution of tenurial rights, but its unfinished aspects – incomplete implementation of ceiling, tenures remain highly fragmented, land records are weak, and there is entrenched gender bias in inheritance – continue to limit agricultural productivity, rural livelihoods and access to land. Based on recent research that connects land consolidation and land administration reform with Sustainable Development Goals, the review argues that land reform in Uttar Pradesh should be understood not as an historical event, but as an ongoing and, no doubt, unfinished process and should be revisited in terms of implementation, modernization of land records, and reform of inheritance law with gender equality in mind.*

**Keywords:** land reform; Uttar Pradesh; zamindari abolition; land consolidation; tenancy; sustainable rural development

## 1. Introduction

In Uttar Pradesh (UP), land is the fundamental asset of rural India and the politics and administration of land reform has been the most important and closely followed in the country. The experience of land reform in UP has informed and been informed by the trajectory of rural development in the state for more than 70 years, as it is the most populous state and where two thirds of the population continues to rely on agriculture. It was the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act of 1950 (Government of Uttar Pradesh, 1950) enacted by UP, followed by the Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition Committee report, which was chaired by Pandit Govind Ballabh Pant, that became a model for other Indian states. The state of UP has also been characterised in terms of its early implementation of land ceiling law, and an unusual institutional continuity

with respect to land consolidation (chakbandi) as an ongoing administration programme, more than seven decades after the process started (Munnangi, Lohani, & Misra, 2020).

This review has three purposes. First, it discusses the chronology of land reform measures adopted in UP in the context of their interrelationships and their place in the national debate on agrarian reform: the zamindari abolition, the tenancy regulation, the land ceiling and the land consolidation. Second, it integrates empirical research on the effects of such reforms on agricultural productivity, rural poverty and land related inequality, including the gendered nature of land inheritance that has continued since the reforms. Third, and most centrally, it examines the relationship of this body of reform to the ongoing contemporary discourse on sustainable rural development with its documented relevance to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and those aspects of the reform agenda that remain at the heart of the state's rural future.

It is based on legal-historical literature on the Zamindari Abolition Act, economic studies in the Indian Journal of Agricultural Economics and Economic and Political Weekly, contemporary land-policy literature in Land Use Policy and the Journal of Development Studies and World Bank policy research on land reform and poverty in India, as well as recent literature on gendered land ownership based on digital land records. It is structured thematically and begins with the historical elimination of intermediary tenures and then examines tenancy and ceiling reform, land consolidation, productivity and poverty impacts, gender, and land records modernisation, and ends with a discussion of the unfinished reform agenda.

## **2. Historical Background: Agrarian Structure in Colonial Uttar Pradesh**

Land reform in UP aimed to overthrow the agrarian structure that was rooted in the colonial revenue settlement. Under the British regime the zamindari system was formalised and extended, resulting in a class of revenue collectors between the cultivator and the government who collected rent, had great coercive power over the tenants and had little direct responsibility for agricultural investment or improvement. This settlement created a very hierarchical rural order: zamindars and taluqdars were at the top, followed by a level of occupancy and non-occupancy tenants of varying tenurial security, and share-croppers and landless agricultural labourers were at the bottom, lacking any security at all (Legal Service India, n.d.; iPleaders, 2020).

This structure was widely discredited, both in economic and social terms, by the time of Independence and was seen to be both economically unviable and socially inequitable, irrespective of political viewpoints. Landless farmers lacked the incentive to invest in land improvement because they did not derive income from the land itself, but from the extraction of rent; and insecure tenants lacked the incentive to invest in the land in which they had their own labour and capital because they might not be able to keep the land. The Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee of 1949 and the report of the Zamindari Abolition Committee headed by G. B.

Pant presented the argument for the elimination of intermediary tenures as a prerequisite for social justice and agricultural modernisation, in particular for UP. The Congress Agrarian Reforms Committee of 1949 and, specifically for UP, the report of the Zamindari Abolition Committee under G. B. Pant made the case for the abolition of intermediary tenures as a precondition for both social justice and agricultural modernisation (Egyankosh, n.d.). The basis for the UP Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, 1950 was directly provided by this diagnosis.

### **3. The First Wave: The Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, 1950**

The Uttar Pradesh Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act was enacted on 24 January 1951 after receiving the presidential assent, and the intermediary rights were transferred to the state by the vesting order on 1 July 1952 (iPleaders, 2020). The titles and rights of all the intermediaries were eliminated from the date of vesting, and the cultivators who were in actual possession of the land, whether as a sir-holder or as an occupancy tenant or any other category, generally became bhumidhar, sirdar or asami, respectively, under the newly rationalised tenure classification of the Act (Black n' White Journal, 2020). The Act also created Gaon Samaj (village community bodies) and related Land Management Committees for the administration of the common lands of the villages, which had been held by zamindars, and was a significant, though undervalued, innovation in the governance of the villages (Black n' White Journal, 2020).

Evaluation of the Act's design has noted some of the successes of the Act, as well as its structural constraints. However, the proponents of the Act were under the impression that the Act was doing more good than harm, since it abolished intermediaries as a class, granted direct tenurial rights to the actual cultivator based on the principle of "land to the tiller", eliminated the possibility of sub letting and established uniform rules of succession for the tenure holders removing a patchwork of personal law-based succession rules (Black n' White Journal, 2020). In the other direction, legal-historical analysis has focused on the absence of any obligation on the part of the zamindars to hand over land beyond intermediary rights and the fact that there was no ceiling on land that a zamindar could keep for personal cultivation (iPleaders, 2020). This led to many zamindars retaining vast tracts of land on the pretext of "personal cultivation" with the result that many tenants were thrown off the land and the zamindars reclaimed control, something which would be rectified to a large extent by the subsequent ceiling laws. Compensation to the former zamindars done under a Rehabilitation Schedule also implied that in most cases, this class was not left without significant residual assets. (iPleaders, 2020)

Implementation was hindered by legal issues. The affected zamindars argued that the abolition of zamindari was unconstitutional as it infringed upon the fundamental right to property as guaranteed by Article 19 and 31 of the Constitution. This litigation, which was repeated in several states that wanted the same form of

reform, was an immediate impetus for the Ninth Schedule to be added to the Constitution of India to protect land reform laws from being used to attack them on fundamental-rights reasons (JudicateMe, 2021; International Journal of Law Management & Humanities). It provides a good example of what has been argued in the broader literature on land reform in India: that the intentions of the law were constantly challenged, challenged in court and weakened at the point of implementation (Joshi, 1978).

#### **4. Tenancy Reform, Land Ceilings, and Their Limits**

The zamindari abolished problem could not be solved by itself, as it did not deal with the status of tenants-at-will or sharecroppers who worked on the land for bhumidhars and sirdars, nor did it solve the overall inequality in the distribution of operational holdings. To fill these gaps, two other strands of legislation were drafted: tenancy regulation, to protect the rights of actual cultivators against arbitrary eviction and rack-renting; and land ceiling legislation, in order to limit the extent of land held by any individual and distribute excess land to landless individuals.

The Uttar Pradesh Imposition of Ceiling on Land Holdings Act (Uttar Pradesh Act No. 18 of 1960) was enacted in 1960 with presidential assent on 24 December 1960 (Government of Uttar Pradesh, 1960). As far as performance in national assessments are concerned, UP was an early and a rather successful player as among all the states which took up ceiling-surplus land it was reported to have about 10.2 per cent, ranking second to states like West Bengal, Jammu and Kashmir, and Maharashtra which started early and moved aggressively on the ceiling implementation (LBSNAA n.d. citing Board of Revenue, Government of Uttar Pradesh). This relative success in the first round of implementation is however to be interpreted on the back of the modest absolute scale of ceiling-surplus redistribution on a national level: on the national level, the total area redistributed under ceiling legislation has been estimated at less than two per cent of cultivated area, a relatively small result when compared to the stated goals of the reform (PMFIAS, 2025).

There has been a great deal of research on the disconnect between legislative intent and effectiveness of ceiling reform. Joshi (1975, 1978) mentions a number of implementation failures across states in India, including UP, such as definitional loopholes around “personal cultivation” through which landlords could own land, albeit nominally self-cultivated, while actually being able to contract out production to someone else; benami (proxy) transfers of land to relatives or fictitious persons in the years leading up to the implementation of the ceiling law, whereby the landlord would avoid the ceiling limit on paper but effectively maintain control; long and often protracted court delays, in some cases years or decades, in transferring surplus lands; and land records that were poorly kept, obscuring the true size of holdings and making prosecution difficult (PMFIAS, 2025). A comparative study of tenancy patterns in different states in India by Bardhan (1976) also highlights the importance of the level of tenancy regulation stringency in determining the degree of formal tenancy

undergrounded into concealed and unprotected sharecropping relations, as was found in UP for several other northern states in India.

An additional hurdle in the implementation of tenancy reform was that sharecroppers were often not considered a protected “tenant” by the law. However, while some states, like West Bengal, later modified their tenancy law to include sharecroppers, as PMFIAS (2025) points out in a comparative national assessment, UP's tenancy framework remained one of the states' laws that continued to exclude sharecroppers from the security of tenure provisions, thereby leaving a large share of actual cultivators outside the reach of the security of tenure protections even after formal reform had been achieved.

### **5. Land Consolidation (Chakbandi): India's longest running land reform**

While the first wave of land reform in UP was characterized by system of zamindari abolition and the ceiling law, the least talked about yet longest running part of the land reform was land consolidation commonly known as chakbandi (literally the arrangement of chak, a small plot) in Hindi in UP. Chakbandi aims to rationalise broken and small pieces of land, which are often broken up over many years as parcels are inherited, into fewer, larger, adjacent parcels per cultivator and was first introduced in 1954 in the Muzaffarnagar and Sultanpur tehsils in the UP state (Munnangi et al., 2020; Basic Home Loan, 2026). Strikingly, UP is the only Indian state that continues to enforce consolidation as an active programme to date, and to have several thousand villages that are currently subject to consolidation (Munnangi et al., 2020).

But the logic behind consolidation is based on a large amount of evidence not only from India, but from other countries as well, that shows that agricultural efficiency is linked to landholding fragmentation. Using Indian data, Deininger, Monchuk, Nagarajan, and Singh (2017) find that land fragmentation significantly raises the costs of cultivation, due to more time needed to travel between plots, as well as boundary wastage and restrictions on the viability of investing in larger, mechanised areas. Complementary studies by Nagarajan, Jha and Prasanna (2005) on the fragmentation in southern Indian villages also report negative productivity impacts of fragmentation, but highlight that the impact of fragmentation on productivity is not consistently negative everywhere – in some situations fragmenting land holdings can provide some benefits in terms of diversification in response to localised crop failure or price risk.

The most comprehensive recent review of UP's consolidation programme was carried out by Munnangi et al. (2020) who undertook qualitative fieldwork in fourteen villages, six tehsil headquarters and three district headquarters between 2013 and 2018, and analysed documents from the UP Consolidation Directorate. Despite its size and length, their review identifies that despite all the work that has been done to consolidate in UP, the process is still entirely manual and paper based, and that this manual implementation is a major cause of delay, boundary disputes and local capture or manipulation. In this time, their analysis reveals a

dimension of the programme's significance, which has not been widely recognised: systematically capturing the programme in the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) results in a number of SDG targets being identified with which land consolidation in UP is related – up to 24 targets, covering various SDG goals related to poverty, food security, gender, water, and sustainable communities (Munnangi et al., 2020).

This is an important finding with regard to the central concern of the present review. It argues that land consolidation — which in policy discourse is conceived as a narrowly technical agricultural-efficiency measure — is actually one of the most far-reaching, continuously functioning tools of sustainable rural development policy in Uttar Pradesh and that the developmental potential of land consolidation has not been realised due to outdated administrative technology, lack of institutional visibility and the absence of any explicit sustainability framing in its governance.

## **6. Land Reform, Agricultural Productivity and Structural Transformation**

One of the questions that has been a subject of discussion in the literature is whether UP's chain of land reforms has resulted in tangible improvement in the productivity of agriculture. The evidence here is complex and multifaceted. It is argued that the abolition of zamindari has had beneficial effects on the cultivator's incentives, as it has transferred his right of tenure directly to the cultivator, who would then have greater incentives to make investment on the land, which absentee intermediaries did not have. The productivity improvements due to this first wave of reform were however limited by the lack of full implementation of the ceilings, which has left a largely unequal distribution of operational holdings unchanged even after the abolition of the intermediary level (PMFIAS, 2025).

The next, and perhaps more enduring, limitation to productivity has been fragmentation of land ownership caused by many years of inheritance-based land division by a swiftly expanding agricultural sector. Deininger et al. (2017) found strong econometric evidence based on Indian household data that fragmentation increases the actual cost of cultivation, an issue of great relevance to UP where the chakbandi programme was launched to solve the problems caused by fragmentation. If consolidation has been accomplished, sources citing the impact of the programme state that a significant proportion of the State's farm land, about two-thirds, has been consolidated since the programme's inception (The Whitelisted Estates, 2026), and that improvements in irrigation system, reduction in boundary litigation and feasibility of mechanised cultivation have been reported (LegalKart, n.d.; Landeed, 2026). Such assertions, mostly based on government and industry statements, should be taken with a grain of salt, and must be read in conjunction with the study by Munnangi et al. (2020) which quantified the claims using field research; the variability across villages in the implementation quality and the delay caused by the manual nature of the process themselves.

A second, ecologically important aspect of UP's agrarian revolution had to do with the western part of the State where the diffusion of the Green Revolution technology was part of a larger north-western diffusion from the mid-1960s. A recurring finding of spatial pattern analyses of the Green Revolution in India is that the green revolution benefits the principal regions where high yielding varieties (HYVs) have been adopted and where agricultural production is irrigated, which are western UP, Punjab, and Haryana, and that these areas are also the ones with comparatively less skewed landholding distributions and more secure tenure of the cultivators (Dayal, 1984, discussed with regard to the wider north Indian pattern). In contrast, however, smaller more scattered units and more uncertain irrigation in Eastern UP have consistently struggled to catch up in productivity growth, and the unevenness and incompleteness of the land reform in that area further accentuated its own east-west internal division.

## **7. Land Reform, Poverty Reduction, and Rural Livelihoods**

In addition to productivity, an important reason for land reform has been its possible role in the alleviation of rural poverty – the redistributive transfer of a productive asset to the landless and land-poor. Key findings from a cross-state study of land reform in India (Deininger, Jin, and Nagarajan 2007), conducted under the auspices of the World Bank, explicitly in the context of a sustainable rural development research program, indicate that both tenancy reform and implementation of a land ceiling are linked to observable, state-level poverty-reducing effects, mediated by the effects of reform on investment incentives faced by landholder households and, in the case of implementation of a land ceiling, by the direct transfer of land to the poor. Their analysis, however, also shows that the extent of this relationship varies significantly between states, depending on the extent of implementation and level of rigor, which is an observation relevant to UP as the gaps to implementation of the ceiling were documented in the literature above.

Redistribution of land from the ceiling has been shown to bring real but limited benefits to beneficiary households at the household level, such as better security of tenure over the land, a decrease in their reliance on exploitative tenancy or bond-like relationships, and better access to institutional credit and cooperative inputs after formal titling (ForumIAS, 2025). However, the assessments also highlight that many beneficiary households were often allocated to poor quality land, or to several parcels that were more or less legally contested, and that a significant fraction of allotted beneficiaries could not achieve effective and uncontested control of their allotted land, with cases before the courts resulting from both landlord contestation and from problems in obtaining physical control of land (World Bank Policy Research Working Paper 4448, discussed in Deininger et al., 2007).

In recent decades, the rural non-farm economy and state employment guarantee programmes have increasingly become an important complement and in part even alternative to land-based livelihoods for the

rural poor in UP. Roy's (2014) study of the Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act suggests that the legal guarantee of rural wage work has been put to use by rural workers, not only as an additional source of income but as a way to challenge the local labour market dynamics and assert a bargaining power against the dominant landholders; in essence, extending the redistributive agenda of the land reform to the area of rural wage relations. This implies that sustainable rural development in UP has become increasingly reliant on a broader policy framework than just land reform, despite the fact that the lack of land reform has not been resolved and continues to influence the vulnerability that is to be addressed by the complementary programmes.

## 8. Gender, Land Rights and Inclusive Rural Development

One area of ongoing and growing debate about UP's land reform policy is the treatment of women's inheritance rights. The original 1950 Zamindari Abolition and Land Reforms Act, which was based on the tenet of “land to the tiller” and was drafted at a time when the cultivator was presumed to be a male, failed to acknowledge daughters as primary inheritors of agricultural land as opposed to sons (Landesa, n.d.-a). Much of the previous tenurial laws were consolidated and superseded by the next UP Revenue Code 2006, which extended inheritance rights to unmarried daughters but continued to regard married daughters as having a subordinate position in the statutory order of succession under Section 108 vis-à-vis sons and unmarried daughters (Landesa, n.d.-a; India Herald, 2025). This ‘succession’ has been found to affect women's bargaining power and vulnerability within the household as well as when they are in the process of marital dissolution or widowhood, as agricultural land is a livelihood asset, security of credit, and a social marker (Legal Service India, 2026).

This state-based inheritance system is in stark contrast to the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, which at the national level, gave daughters equal rights to coparcenary rights in ancestral property irrespective of their marital status. While agricultural land is still a state subject in the Indian Constitution, however, UP and a number of other states in the north-western region have been following their own tenurial succession codes for agricultural land specifically, resulting in conflicting judicial interpretations, such as divergent rulings of the Allahabad High Court on whether to apply state tenurial law or the national Hindu Succession Act to agriculture land in particular succession cases (Landesa, n.d.-b; SCC Times, 2021).

Recent empirical research provides evidence of the material impacts of this divide. In a study of a sample of digitized land records in 12 Indian states and union territories (UTs), Jain, Saxena, Sen and Sanan (2023) find that women's representation in formal land ownership is very small across the country, and in some states, such as UP, women make up a significant share of the agricultural workforce but are very small in number in terms of land ownership formally recorded in land records. Their analysis also reveals that land registered in

the name of women is often smaller or of inferior agricultural value when compared to those registered in the name of males, and that formal joint ownership of land does not necessarily equate with equal decision-making power over land use (Jain et al., 2023). Landesa's (n.d.-a) own on-the-ground research at the time comes to a similar conclusion, stating that it is a “choice between marriage and inheritance” for daughters in UP because marriage traditionally undermined a daughter's inheritance rights in UP's state system of succession.

More recently, this awareness has been leading to a rethinking of the legislation. As reported in 2025, the Uttar Pradesh government had begun to take steps to remove the word “unmarried” from the relevant inheritance clause of the Uttar Pradesh Revenue Code, which would effectively mean that married daughters would be on the same footing as sons and unmarried daughters in terms of land succession for agriculture purposes. In whatever form it eventually takes, this development confirms that issues of gender-equitable land rights are ongoing and unresolved aspects of land reform in UP and are directly tied to the state's commitment to achieving SDG 5 on gender equality, which explicitly includes equal rights to economic resources, including land, as a policy target (Landesa, n.d.-a).

## **9. The Digital Transition in Agriculture and its Implications for Land Records Management (LRM).**

The need for strong and timely land records, and the lack of such records, are central issues in the literature on land consolidation and the implementation of ceilings. The poor maintenance of the khasra (plot level record) and khatauni (holding level record) has been cited as a cause of implementation failure throughout the implementation of the land reform programme, including during the process of ceiling and the consolidation proceedings, where it can lead to boundary disputes, and for preventing beneficiaries from establishing their secure, contestable-proof title to allotted or inherited land, (PMFIAS, 2025; Homwisor, 2026).

In recent years, policy has turned its focus on digitisation as a means to remedy these endemic deficiencies. The national Digital India Land Records Modernisation Programme (DILRMP) and complementary state level programmes such as the UP's digitisation of Bhulekh data (land records) is to produce up-to-date, geo-referenced and publicly available records of land, and the programme SVAMITVA extends to mapping of land in rural residential (abadi) land through drone survey (PMFIAS, 2025; Homwisor, 2026). In fact, Munnangi et al. (2020) recommend that such technological modernisation – such as use of geographic information system (GIS) mapping, and better information-system support – needs to be a complement to the still fully manual UP's consolidation process, as digitisation would have material consequences for the sustainability-relevant transparency of the consolidation process and the speed with which it is executed.

But the digitisation is not a neutral or merely technical solution. Jain et al. (2023) build on this by analysing sex-disaggregated digital land records to show that, in fact, digitisation can help to make previously hidden patterns of gender inequity in land ownership more apparent and measurable, which represents a valuable contribution to the evidence base for developing policy, but also highlights that, if it is to make a positive contribution, digitisation of land records cannot replace substantive legal reform – it must come alongside.

### **10. Linking land to SDGs: Land Reform.**

Land reform is explicitly identified as a driver of sustainable development in UP as a driver of sustainable development is a relatively new aspect of the scholarly discussion, and is most clearly stated in the systematic mapping of chakbandi activities and SDG targets by Munnangi et al. (2020). Their analysis connects poverty reduction (SDG 1) to consolidation as it increases the income of the cultivators and decreases litigation costs; food security and sustainable agriculture (SDG 2) through improved access to irrigation channels and feasibility of mechanisation of consolidated plots; gender equality (SDG 5) as consolidation involves formal registration of women's names on updated land titles; clean water and sanitation (SDG 6) as consolidation is associated with rational planning of irrigation channels, which are less fragmented; and sustainable cities and communities (SDG 11) as consolidation involves planning of village roads, drainage, and common infrastructure, typically, which accompanies consolidation proceedings (Munnangi et al., 2020).

Much of the value of this SDG framing is that it reveals a link which the institutional arrangements of UP do not make explicit: Land reform, in this case land consolidation, is an instrument of the current sustainability policy of the rural landscape, not a historical episode that ended in the abolition of zamindarism in the 1950s. It also highlights a governance gap. In the absence of an ongoing process of systematically measuring and optimising chakbandi for sustainability-related outcomes, its important contribution to these goals is not systematically measured, but rather empirically demonstrated, and is not taken up in the broader rural development and sustainability planning process in the state, presenting a considerable missed opportunity with regard to better integrated rural development policy design.

The other parallel sustainability dimension is related to the care of consolidated land. As chakbandi reorganises the boundaries of the plots, it also generally reorganises irrigation channels, field boundaries and drainage patterns, which has direct implications on groundwater management and soil conservation — issues of particular importance in western UP where groundwater depletion has become a significant long-term constraint on agricultural sustainability, as in the north-western Green Revolution belt in general. The literature examined here indicates that these environmental aspects of land consolidation are under-researched compared with other well-documented aspects of the consolidation's productivity and poverty impacts and are therefore another gap in the evidence base.

## 11. Ongoing Obstacles and the incomplete reform effort

The review of the strands above, taken together, outlines a few common challenges that constitute the unfinished agenda of land reform in Uttar Pradesh. The failure of implementation in absolute terms is faced with ceiling law implementation due to definitional loopholes, benami evasion and prolonged litigation, meaning that the redistributive objective of the ceiling law has been only partially achieved, even in the case of comparatively good performance during the initial rounds of implementation during the 1950s and 1960s (Joshi, 1975, 1978; PMFIAS, 2025).

Second, the landholding fragmentation persists even after consolidation has been completed, partly due to the manual nature of the chakbandi process, which is slow, and partly because of the likelihood of some fragmentation through inheritance-based subdivision over time even after consolidation has taken place (Munnangi et al., 2020 and Deininger et al., 2017).

Third, gender inequitable inheritance practices of agricultural land remain to limit women's legal access to land, economic security, and bargaining power in rural households despite some constitutional developments at the national level with the Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act, 2005, and despite recent efforts toward reform of the state's own Agricultural Land Reform Code (ALRC) provision (Landesa, n.d.-a, n.d.-b; Jain et al., 2023).

Fourth, land records — although the extent of recent investment in the digitisation of these is significant — remain a common weak point and connection between the failures of the past and the capacity constraints of the present in the area of security of tenure for those who benefited from the reforms and for later generations of title holders (Homwisor, 2026; PMFIAS, 2025).

Fifth, and more conceptually, in UP land reform is still viewed as a distinct policy field from contemporary sanitation and development planning for rural areas, despite its proven yet not so widely used relevance to a large number of SDG targets (Munnangi et al., 2020). This fragmentation in governance turns out to be one of the most important institutional challenges to improve the developmental outcomes of the UP's land reform legacy in the future: including land administration in a broader sustainable rural development strategy.

## 12. Conclusion

The path of land reform in Uttar Pradesh—from the elimination of zamindari intermediaries in the early 1950s, to a long-running programme of land ceiling, tenancy regulation and, most importantly, land consolidation—is one of the longest and most impactful periods of agrarian reform in India. This review has demonstrated that the reform secured real and historically significant results, as well as eliminating an oppressive 'middleman' class, granting the cultivators direct tenurial rights and, by consolidation, a still ongoing process

of rationalisation of one of the most fragmented agricultural land use systems in the country. The review, however, has also uncovered significant and enduring gaps in the process of the reform, from the distribution of ceilings to the continued fragmentation, weak land records, and, most notably, the inheritance system that remains unequal for women, and even more so for married daughters, to access agricultural land.

Central to this review is the idea that land reform is not a historical fact of the 1950s as it is often seen, but rather is a policy tool that remains active, unfinished and in many respects under leveraged in the quest to achieve sustainable rural development in Uttar Pradesh. In recent years, scholarship has been accumulating regarding the direct relevance of land consolidation to a diverse range of Sustainable Development Goals, indicating a high potential for more purposefully using land administration in the State's broader rural development and sustainable planning process. These unfinished but achievable land reform goals for sustainable rural development in UP are all part of a single, unified land reform agenda that focuses on redistributive ceiling reform, speeding up and modernizing consolidation, narrowing the gender gap in land inheritance, and improving the land records system on which these goals will all depend.

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