



## UPDATING LAND RECORDS IN TELANGANA: SUGGESTED AMENDMENTS TO THE RYTHU VARI BHU SURVEY

### Introduction

On 23 August 2017, the Chief Minister of Telangana announced a statewide survey of land and land records with the aim of ‘purifying’ them. Work under the Telangana Land Records Updation Project (LRUP) was to be divided across two phases, in order to cover rural and then urban areas. The first phase—‘Rythu Vari Bhu Survey’, as it was christened—began in September and December 2017. Its purpose was to update existing revenue records (specifically the *pahani*<sup>i</sup> and the ROR 1B<sup>ii</sup>) to reflect ground realities in rural Telangana (Revenue Department Government of Telangana, 2017, p. 1)<sup>iii</sup>. Unlike regular revenue surveys, the exercise was restricted to the updating of textual (and not spatial) records. The reason behind the survey’s limited focus was that its outcomes were meant to primarily facilitate the roll-out of the Telangana Chief Minister’s ambitious ‘Rythu Bandhu’ scheme—an investment support

scheme for farmers of the state. Each land-owning farmer is to receive ₹4,000 per acre during each sowing season, altogether receiving ₹8,000 per acre in a year (Janyala, 2018)<sup>iv</sup>. It was therefore crucial for the government to ascertain the rightful owners of the land in order to fulfil the promise of this support scheme.

In addition to verifying ownership claims—which was its main focus—work under the survey also included updating successions; partitions; corrections in names, extent and survey number; exchange of lands; lands put to non-agricultural use; details of government lands and government-assigned lands; and details of community-owned lands. The first phase of LRUP is reported to be very successful since 93 per cent of the *khatas*<sup>v</sup> in the state were made clear (Dr. Marri Channa Reddy HRD Institute of Telangana [MCRHRDI], 2018, p. 2)<sup>vi</sup>.

This phase saw a total of 1,523 teams being deployed in 10,823 villages (MCRHRDI, 2018, p. 1). While the survey helped in building capacity for the rollout of the Rythu Bandhu scheme, it did not tick all the boxes as far as a proper exercise to update land records is concerned.

This policy brief highlights two key gaps in the Rythu Vari Bhu survey—the omission of spatial data and the non-inclusion of agricultural tenants from the scope of the survey. It also recommends filling these gaps, thereby enabling creation of a more comprehensive land records database in the state.

### Leaving spatial data updates out of the ambit of the survey

The updating of spatial records was excluded from the scope of the survey, despite the Chief Minister himself pointing out instances where spatial records are not up-to-date or do not exist at all. This poses a serious problem as spatial records are integral to ensure comprehensive land records which reflect all aspects of the land parcels in a state. While most states have been reluctant to carry out a cadastral resurvey owing to its financial burden, political implications and the potential threat of litigation, there is a need for updated spatial land records in order to have complete information about land parcels.

**Recommendation:** Since the Rythu Vari Bhu Survey has already adopted a unique approach, distinct from a regular cadastral survey, the inclusion of basic spatial information in the survey will go a long way in

improving the overall condition of land records.

### Non-inclusion of agricultural tenants in the survey

According to the Socio-Economic Caste Census of 2011, 57.54 per cent of rural households in Telangana do not own land. There are an estimated 14 lakh agricultural tenant farmers in the state and their absence from both the Rythu Bandhu scheme and LRUP defeats the overall objective of ensuring that the financial benefits are received by the actual tillers of the land. The government maintains that the exclusion of agricultural tenants from the scheme's ambit was a deliberate move to avoid potential litigation borne out of their informal work conditions. At the same time, however, no farmer investment support scheme can fulfil its objectives without including agricultural tenants.

**Recommendation:** It is imperative that the status of agricultural tenants be recorded as part of the Rythu Vari Bhu Survey since they are the actual tillers of the land.

### Conclusion

Despite the significant gaps in its eventual outcomes, LRUP presents a new approach to improving land records, a problem that plagues just about every state in India. The real challenge in Telangana, however, will lie in ensuring that these land records are consistently updated in order to avoid singular correction exercises such as the LRUP in future.

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<sup>i</sup> The *pahani* is the most basic textual land record in Telangana prepared by the Village Revenue Officer. It does not constitute a Record of Rights (RoR) but is critical as it records details like the owner of the land, how they came to be in ownership of the land, mutations and tenancies.

<sup>ii</sup> The 'ROR 1B' denotes Form 1B under the Telangana Rights in Land and Pattadar Passbook Rules, 1989. It comprises formal RoR for land in the state. It contains details that are included in the

*pahani* and is used to create other documents like *pattadar* passbooks.

<sup>iii</sup> Revenue Department, Government of Telangana. (2017). *Circular 1 Land Records Updation Project Rangareddy District*. Hyderabad, India.

<sup>iv</sup> Janyala, S. (2018, February 15). Agriculture Income Support: Telangana breaks new ground in farm subsidy. *The Indian Express*.

<sup>v</sup> *Khatas* refer to textual land records.

<sup>vi</sup> Dr. Marri Channa Reddy HRD Institute of Telangana. (2018). *Note on Land Records Updation Programme*. Hyderabad, India.