

# **Punjab - Land Records Management and Information Systems**

**By**

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The system of management of land records in the province of Punjab is centuries old and was put in place for the purpose of collection of land taxes by the rulers. The tradition was continued by the British after their occupation of Punjab in 1848. They extended and refined the system they had put in place elsewhere in India and in 1953 the first settlement operation was started to settle revenue and in the process prepare detailed records of ownership and tenancy. Since then almost the entire agricultural land of the areas now constituting Punjab have had detailed records of land including records of ownership, tenancy, type of land and the crops sown. Although land revenue has now been abolished the records continue to be maintained as a public good.

With decline of governance standards in the country the quality of the system of maintenance of land records has also suffered in terms of quality. There are many reasons for this decline in standards. The systems were designed by the British for an environment where land holdings were relatively large, population pressure on land was not overwhelming and it was possible to maintain land records and monitor their maintenance through systems based on hand written records relying on personal identification. This is no longer the case. Today there are more than 20 million persons recorded as land owners in Punjab. The capacities of the revenue department personnel have deteriorated over decades because of an archaic pre-induction training regime, no change in the qualifications required and virtual evaporation of the monitoring systems. This and other reasons have led to an increased tendency of rent seeking and a strong perception that the system requires a major overhaul.

The need for reform felt in the Government of Punjab has over the last two decades, taken the form of an understanding that the first step toward any reform of the system has to be the digitization of the existing records and preparation of a consolidated data base of ownership and tenancy records. Efforts in this direction have, however, not been successful so far. At least four pilot initiatives started by the provincial government have either failed and abandoned or have met only partial success. The latest such initiative has been started only last year and the design of this initiative is based on the lessons learnt from the failed attempts of the previous 15 years.

The objective of the Punjab Land Records Management and Information Systems Project is to create a secure, reliable, efficient, accountable and equitable system of management of land records. Such a system is expected to increase title security and reduce transaction costs.

One of the identified reasons for the failure of the previous pilots is the non-availability of a robust software for data entry and recording transactions. Somehow, it seems that the softwares developed in-house and through outsourcing could not cover the complexities of the system. After a detailed problem analysis it was decided that this being a critical project issue, it is necessary to get a software developed through a competitive process. The Government has been involved with four software development firms over the last more than a year for this purpose. All the four firms selected through an International Competitive Bidding process using World Bank procurement procedures have analysed, designed and developed a software each. The developed softwares have been tested three times, each time improving the functional capacity of each software. These softwares are now being used to enter data of one Kanungoi (consisting of almost 15000 owners) each. After training and deployment of these softwares in one Service Centre each in Kasur, a final evaluation process will be initiated, using criteria announced up-front to select the best software from among

these. The selected software will be used for data entry and service delivery in the entire province.

It is expected that the software development and selection process will be completed by the end of 2008 and implementation of the project in four districts of the province will be initiated during the first quarter of 2009. Land records of 18 districts of the province (remaining 17 districts to be taken up in a subsequent project) are expected to be digitized by the end of 2011. Simultaneously service centres will be set up in each Kanungoi (and administrative unit under the Tehsil). These Service Centres will provide basic services related to land records i.e. provision of copies of land records and receipt of requests for transactions (mutations). Moreover the project will also make the land records searchable through the internet. Both these changes are expected to make records more accessible and therefore less prone to rent seeking practices.

The project has been designed so that the existing records will be captured in digital form with minimal business process changes. A few legal amendments have been made to grant legal recognition to the records maintained in digital form. However, the project includes study and changes of business processes to improve the quality of service delivery. Most of these changes will be introduced during the second phase of the project. One example of changes being contemplated is the use of computerized identity cards and a linkage with the NADRA database to identify the parties to transactions. Moreover, including digital photographs and biometric features of the parties to transaction to reduce possibilities of fraud are also under consideration. It is important to note that a number of business process improvements will become possible after digital databases replace the hand written records. The processes currently under study include the mutation (intiqal) process, crop inspection (girdawari) process, settlement and consolidation processes and registration of deeds process.

A broader analysis of the system is also under way and a discussion is under way in the Government of Punjab whether a transformation from a deeds registration system to a title registration system (Torren's) is feasible and required. There is considerable evidence in support of the present strategy of the provincial government not to move to a title registration system and trying to improve the existing deeds registration system.

A much more ambitious project is required to link the system for transactions in the urban areas after developing a database of urban properties and titles in those properties. The existing system for the urban areas deals only with the transactions (and even that is not a complete system – inheritance and muslim gift transactions are not captured) and does not provide for maintenance of title records. Such a project will require a major shift in the legal paradigms regarding urban properties and can only be attempted after the shift has been initiated.

Although issuance of agricultural passbooks is not a part of the present project but the Government of Punjab intends to include the process within the framework of the project as soon as digital records of rights are put into place. Another component of the project is to provide online access to the financial institutions and banks in order to facilitate the process of issuance of agricultural credit. These components are contingent on the successful installation of the system in the districts.

Another project has been initiated by the Punjab Government to improve and automate the process of registration of deeds in the offices of sub-registrars. This project, still at the pilot stage, aims at making the process of registration simpler and more transparent. The project will also be linked with the LRMIS project and will have implications for the urban as well as rural areas.