

Small farmers, peasants, landless workers and agriculture in Pakistan

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Land distribution in Pakistan is highly unequal as five percent large landholders possess 64 percent of total farm land and 65 percent small farmers hold 15 percent of such land.

The large landholders have all the political powers and economic advantages. Around 50.8 percent of rural households are landless while the poverty.

Over the last few decades a new form of feudalism emerged particularly during the periods of military dictatorship. With the help of the state machinery, the poor, small landholders are forced to hand over their land to a particular family for insignificant sums. New feudal owners like Jahangir Tareen of Imran Khan’s Pakistan Tehreek Insaaf now own thousands of acres of land. He has become a typical Pakistani feudalist: a “well-educated” person who, with the help of military dictators, was able to buy sugar mills along with thousands of acres of land. It’s a vulgar combination of feudalism and capitalism.

The landlords’ base of power over local people is takes place at every step. Debt bondage is passed down “generation after generation” and the landlord controls the “distribution of water, fertilizers, tractor permits and agricultural credit.” This in turn gives them influence over the “revenue, police and judicial administration” of local government and its officials. In recent times, particularly harsh feudalism has existed in rural Sindh, Baluchistan and some parts of Southern Punjab. It is a form of slavery in 21st century Pakistan.

In 2017, Agriculture contributes about 24 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Pakistan and accounts for half of employed labour force. Important crops are wheat, cotton, rice, sugarcane, maize etc. However, the situation of the small farmers, peasants and landless peasants remains bad in all aspects.

Despite being rich in agriculture, the National Nutrition Survey 2018 reported that 62 percent of Pakistan’s population is food insecure, while the International Food Policy Research Institute’s (IFPRI’s) Global Hunger Index (GHI) 2014 states that Pakistan is one of the most food insecure countries in Asia

Agriculture is heavily contributing towards the economy of Pakistan. However, water deficiency and drought conditions, long duration load shedding issue, poor extension services, absence of land reforms, absence of distribution of certified varieties, high price of fertilizers, deliberate use of adulterated, non-recommended and expired insecticides, non utilization of cultivable waste land, conventional farming practices, indirect access of farmer to main market, absence of ecological based cropping education & extension services, depletion of forests and disease outbreaks of poultry birds are some of the key issues that are playing a negative role in demotion of agricultural sector in

Pakistan.

Over 60% population is agriculture dependent, yet there is not a single school or a training centre for hands-on-job farmers. Extension Services meant to educate and guide farmers with neutral advice are dormant. Knowledge gap is filled by sales representatives of Inputs supply companies. Their advice is generally biased and as a result, due to excessive use of purchased inputs production cost increased, quality of output decreased, and farmers profit decreased while soil and environment polluted.

Most of the state owned policies towards agriculture are in favour of the landlords. Look at this figure; During 2018, 18,606 big landlords got agricultural credit worth Rs222.7 billion. Against this, 1.752 million small farmers got just Rs183.6bn. A little more than 110,000 mid-sized landowners received Rs76.3bn.

Big landlords are defined as those holding more than 50 acres of land in Punjab and Khyber Pakhtunkhwa and over 64 acres of land in Sindh and Balochistan. Small farmers are those who hold up to 12.5 acres in Punjab and KP, up to 16 acres in Sindh and up to 32 acres in Balochistan. Mid-sized landowners of each province fall in between.

The fact that less than 20,000 big landlords get more bank credit than 1.75m small farmers explains a lot about public and private sector banks working on the advices of the government.

Government policies are meant to support processors of agriculture produce. There is no vehicle for progress and no institution to address farmers grievances.

Subsidy which is a marketing tool is used for selling. Subsidy should be used for the introduction of new technology, process or machine tool and from there on it should sell on its own strength. Here, and in most countries subsidy is misused and never reached to the end beneficiary.

Agri production as well quality of production is declining year after year due to a process of agriculture production known as industrial agriculture, introduced in late 60's which recommend use of inorganic materials and genetically modified seeds.

Pakistan is at the edge of water scarcity and over 80% water is being wasted. Underground water level dropped over 80 feet in the past 20 years due excessive pumping that has caused wastage and salinity in soil, resulting reduced fertility and output.

Pakistan is burdened by devastating water shortages. The country's per capita water availability ranks among Asia's lowest, and is lower than that of many African nations. At least 90 percent of Pakistan's dwindling water supplies are allocated to agriculture, yet in- efficient irrigation and poor drainage have produced epidemics of waterlogging and soil salinity across the countryside.

Due to the absence of the land reforms in Pakistan, the subsidies and other farmer based incentives given by the government are enjoyed by the landlords and the farmer with small land holding suffers in the end. About 2 percent of households has a complete hold on the 45 percent of the land area. Absence of the land reforms is also bringing about negative changes in the society and is resulting in an over increasing rate of poverty and consequently there is an increased rate of the negative behavior in society.

The first land reform by military dictator Ayub Khan were put into force through the Martial Law Regulation No. 64 on February 7, 1959.

- 2.5 million acres of land was resumed

- 2.3 million of it distributed amongst 183,271 tenants and small owners

By another account, the government overtook only 35% of the holdings that exceeded the ceiling.

Riding a wave of socialism, Zulfikar Ali Bhutto as the Civilian Martial Law Administrator (CMLA) and then President, promulgated on March 1, 1972, Martial Law Regulation No. 115 of 1972, often called Land Reforms Regulation 1972. A second wave of reforms were introduced through the Land Reforms Ordinance, 1977 (Ordinance II of 1977) on January 5, 1977. Ceiling on land holdings was reduced to 100 acres for irrigated land and 200 acres for un-irrigated land.

The reforms of 1972 resumed 1.3mn acres and 0.9mn of which was distributed among 76,000 beneficiaries. In 1977, 1.8mn acres were resumed. However, the feudal lords went to the Islamic court and during the 80s, under the martial law of General Zia Ul Haque, lands reforms were declared unIslamic. A case against the decision by the Workers Party is still pending in front of a full bench of Supreme Court of Pakistan.

Landlessness and poverty are closely linked to each other. Being agricultural country, land is considered as a principal asset in Pakistan.

The situation of women peasants is even worst. More than 80% of rural workers do not own their homes; they live under the age-old feudal system, which does not grant them right to shelter. Therefore, all human settlements that are located on state land of any kind held by any civil and non-civil government departments or institutions in the rural area should be registered.

Despite much opposition by civil society organisations (CSOs), small farmers and progressive growers, the Senate of Pakistan approved Seed (Amendment) Act in early 2016. According to the amendment, no unregistered person, whether it is farmers or institutions, will be allowed to stock, sell or exchange any seeds without official permission. It will be a punishable crime with prescribed fines and imprisonment.

The Seed Act 1976 was a farmers friendly and the legislation was such that there was little concern about gene tampering in Pakistan. It made citizens sovereign over their seed, and the public sector alone was responsible for seed development and registration. This present Seed Act allows multinational corporations to produce basic seed for its multiplication and certification, and also set up accredited seed testing laboratories”.

Majority of people living in rural areas depended on agriculture, livestock, and fishing as their prime source of income and livelihoods.

Although there were no estimates for 2019, in 2012, it was estimated that 13.46 million people were employed in Sindh, including 7.74 million in rural areas; the majority of whom were working as sharecroppers (tenants or peasants; most of them were landless), and wage workers on agriculture farms. In 2000, there were an estimated 1.8 million bonded peasants (sharecroppers) in Sindh, and 6.8 million tenants were performing caste-based labour without pay.

One report on fisher folk suggests that in 2013 in Sindh, 40 per cent or 26,002 out of the total of 53,728 people in inland fishing were doing part-time fishing. Over the 13 years from 2001 to 2013, the number of fulltime fishermen had decreased from 29,732 to 27,726, while, the number of part-time fishermen had increased from 19,614 to 26,002.

An increasing number of small and marginal farmers migrate to urban areas to escape poverty. In fact Pakistan is already the most highly urbanized country in South Asia. Clearly increasing migration from the rural areas will create more pressure on already stretched infrastructure of

urban metropolises.

Additionally, as industrial growth in the country remains stunted, and much of the installed industrial base is already capital-intensive, most migrants will be forced to work in the services sector. Thus majority will probably end up working in the informal or black economy at extremely low wages and atrocious working conditions, reinforcing the cycle of poverty and exclusion.

Nature is the biggest farmer on earth and farming since billions of years. We must not go against nature which has four fundamentals:

- Soil and crop plants are not designed to survive in inundation
- No-tillage of soil
- Soil should always remain covered with organic materials
- Plants diversity to develop echo system

We recommend that the Shariat Court decision on land reforms as Un-Islamic should be overturned. A whole sale land reforms be carried out in Pakistan. Food sovereignty should be part of the constitution. Land must be distributed among landless peasantry and small farmers.

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