

Pakistan: Land reforms now

Monday 25 January 2021, by [REHMAN I. A.](#) (Date first published: 3 September 2020).

MUCH has been said over the past few weeks about wheat shortage and imports to ensure regular supplies and fair prices but little attention has been paid to the poor state of agriculture, where the root of the problem lies, or the plight of the people who depend upon it.

According to the latest Economic Survey, agriculture recorded a growth rate of 3.2 per cent during the last fiscal year but for several previous years the farming sector of agriculture had been showing little or negative growth. Its overall performance rose due to the livestock sector's performance.

In 2018, government launched a Rs277 billion Prime Minister's Agriculture Emergency programme. The 10-point programme ranges from enhancement of productivity of wheat, rice, sugarcane and oilseeds and water conservation to backyard poultry farms. We are almost in the middle of the five-year programme and it should be worthwhile to find out how many of the objectives have been achieved and how much of the programme will survive post-pandemic planning. Earlier too, agriculture development packages including credit, price support and marketing facilities, were offered. While these measures did have a positive impact on the economy they did not touch the iniquitous land ownership pattern that is a major cause of the sluggish performance of agriculture.

Agriculture is important on three counts. First, it offers the means of guaranteeing food security. Secondly, it remains a significant contributor to the GDP. And thirdly, it accounts for a little over 33pc of the national labour force. A holistic approach to agricultural development will concentrate as much, if not more, on the well-being of the cultivators as on the promotion of state interest. It is essential to look at the hardship of petty landholders.

The life of owners of tiny pieces of land is unmitigated misery.

According to the latest agriculture census, farms less than an acre constitute 19pc of the total number of farms but the area covered is 1pc of the total; farms under five acres constitute 64pc of the total but the area under their command is only 19pc of the total farm area. On the other hand, farms of 25 acres to over 150 acres constitute only 5pc of the total number of farms but they constitute 35pc of the total area. There have been suggestions that land in the possession of bigger landlords has increased since the last land reform of more than 40 years ago.

The life of owners of tiny pieces of land is unmitigated misery. They cannot afford the essential inputs, nor can they use the machines. They have little access to credit. They are too poor to make any progress in social life and their use of educational facilities is limited.

The solution lies in serious and genuine land reform. Some well-meaning economists argue that the time for land reform has passed. Perhaps the world has fallen in love with corporate farming. However, the case for land reform was not based on the need for efficient farming alone; a more compelling reason was the urgency of reducing the peasantry's land hunger and that reason has not disappeared.

The genuine land reform that was promised before independence, at least to the people of Punjab, has never been carried out. There is little doubt in informed quarters that the land reforms of 1959 and 1970s benefited the landlords more than the deprived peasantry. If the land reform of 1977 touched some privileged landlords it was not implemented.

These days most people have stopped talking of land reform because of the fear of transgressing religious injunctions. This is so because in a judgement that has never ceased to confound students and practitioners of law, the Shariat Appellate Bench of the Supreme Court declared land reform un-Islamic in the 1980s. Now land reform can mean many things beside obliging landlords to part with land in excess of the prescribed limit but everything about land tenure has been given up. A petition questioning the bar on land reforms filed in the Supreme Court by senior lawyer Abid Hasan Minto in 2011 is still pending.

We are referring to land reform in the most comprehensive meaning of the term. It does include rationalisation of the anomalies in the fixation of upper ceiling of holdings. But the land reform being advocated here includes, besides fixation of ceiling on ownership, a host of other matters —from equitable division of output between landlord and tenant and standard agreements between landlords and commercial farmers (mustajirs), to guarantees against damage to soil fertility caused by unscrupulous and wanton exploitation of land, and minimum wages for farm labour. And of course the state's duty to ensure all farmers' access to credit and extension services, if such facilities have survived anywhere, is also included.

Without comprehensive land reform you may have development that will leave the bulk of peasantry as badly off as ever but if development that includes the uplift of the cultivators is intended then land reforms must be carried out sooner rather than later. Talking of agriculture's rejuvenation without land reform will be like entering a race with a cart that has no horse before it.

Tailpiece: Because of a flaw in the law, the NAB chairman has been granted powers to make rules for the bureau's functioning with the approval of the president, that is, the government. For a long time, the NAB chairman did not want the rules to interfere with his whim and caprice. Obligated by the Supreme Court, he has submitted a draft of rules to the court. One does not know whether the government has been consulted. Media reports suggest that the rules have been designed to increase the chairman's powers beyond what is contemplated under the NAB Ordinance. If these reports are true, NAB will become a more horrible instrument of tyranny than it already is. Meanwhile, here are two recent headlines: 'Pakistan's problem is [lack of?] good governance' is attributed to Punjab governor Mohammad Sarwar, and 'Provinces cannot be administered by average leaders' to Federal Minister Fawad Chaudhry.

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