

# **The Fourth Round, And Why They Fight On: An Essay on the History of Land and Reform in Pakistan**

Haris Gazdar  
(gasht@yahoo.com)

March 2009

This paper was written for PANOS South Asia in response to a request for a speculation essay on contemporary issues in land reform in Pakistan seen from a historical perspective. The author is grateful to Ghazah Abbasi and Hussain Bux Mallah for assistance, and to Sobia Ahmed, Ali Cheema and Sohaib Naeem for comments on an earlier draft.

Collective for Social Science Research  
173-I, Block 2, PECHS, Karachi 75400, Pakistan  
Phone: +9221-455-1482, Fax: +9221-454-7532  
researchcollective.org

## Glossary

<b>Word</b>	<b>Translation</b>
batai	crop product sharing between landowner and peasant
benami	alienation of land to anonymous persons
bhaichara village	village where all claimants of landholdings were perceived to be the joint holders of the village
deh	smallest administrative division of land (in Sindh) for land revenue purposes
doabs	territory between two rivers
goth	village in Sindh
haari	sharecropper in Sindh
jaanglee	jungle dwellers
jagirdari	possession of 'jagir'
jagirs	land awarded by colonial officers on which revenue was not due
kammis	pejorative term used for menial workers
katchi abadi	irregular settlement
khasra girdavri	village revenue record
laapo	share of crop belonging to 'zamindar', equivalent to 1/16th of total crop produce
lambardar	honorary government-appointed person for revenue collection and control of village affairs
mahal	smallest administrative division of land (in Punjab and NWFP) for land revenue purposes; village
mahalwari	land revenue system in Punjab and NWFP, based on recognizing the village as the basic unit of land administration
masihi	generic term used for Christians
Mazhabi Sikh	“low-caste” Sikh convert
mukhtiarkar	town level land revenue government official in Sindh
nambardar	landowner in villages in Punjab, appointed by the revenue department as its honorary representative; responsible for collecting land revenue.
nambardari	having the status of a 'nambardar'
nawab	chief of 'jagir' or state
pattidari	land on claim
patwar	low tier (lower than 'tehsildar') revenue government employee in Punjab
rakh	high land away from the riverine tracts
ryot/ raiyat	cultivator
ryotwari	cultivator-based land settlement
sardar	chief of tribe
sardari	pertaining to chief of tribe
shaamilat	land not individually owned, communal land or common property
tehsildar	town level land revenue government official in Punjab
zamindar	landlord
zamindari	land held by a 'zamindar'

## Introduction

Agriculture accounts for around a fifth of the national output in Pakistan, and the crop farming sector within agriculture is responsible for less than a tenth of the gross domestic product.<sup>1</sup> Yet over two-fifths of the workforce is employed in agriculture, and landlessness remains a key but not the predominant correlate of rural poverty.<sup>2</sup> Access to formal sector employment now has as strong an impact on rural incomes as access to land, but the social and political power associated with land ownership can be critical in gaining access to rationed public resources including government jobs.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, agricultural land ownership is highly unequal both in terms of the prevalence of landlessness, and in the concentration of land in relatively large sized ownership holdings. Around half of all rural households do not own any land, and the top 5 per cent own over a third of all cultivated area.

Inequality in land ownership has been blamed alternately for poverty, social and technological backwardness, and political disempowerment.<sup>4</sup> It is widely held that redistributive land reforms – that is, state's takeover of land from large landowners and its allotment to the landless or land-poor -- were slow to take off in Pakistan and did not achieve a great deal due to the political power wielded by the landowning classes<sup>5</sup>. The first significant attempt at redistributive land reforms was undertaken by the military regime of Ayub Khan in 1959. This was followed by land reforms in 1972 and 1977 respectively by the populist government of Zulfikar Ali Bhutto's Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). The 1977 legislation was still-born, as General Zia-ul-Haq's military coup against Bhutto in the same year suspended its operation. Subsequently, litigants argued that redistributive land reforms were contrary to Islamic precepts and Pakistani courts ruled that this was, indeed, the case. Currently much of the land reform legislation remains in abeyance.

The conventional debate about land reform has been linked very closely with analyses of agrarian structures. The main – perhaps the exclusive – focus was on land as an agricultural asset. Land reforms were regarded as the means for effecting distributive and technological change within an agricultural economy. Land reform, in fact, was often thought to be synonymous with agrarian reform, with primary interest being directed to crop farming.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps the declining salience of land reforms from the policy and political agendas is to do with economic diversification. If crop farming is but a small part of the national economy, employment in crop farming (for landowners and the landless alike), represents just one out of many sources of livelihood. It is not surprising that the scramble for public sector jobs competes with mobilization for land reform as a consumer of political energies.

This essay is about land and reform in Pakistan. The relative decline in the importance of the crop economy does not reduce the economic value of land. In fact, the process of economic diversification can lead to an escalation of land values as

---

<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Finance (2006).

<sup>2</sup> Federal Bureau of Statistics (2006), World Bank (2001).

<sup>3</sup> Budhani et al. (2006)

<sup>4</sup> Cotula et. al. (2006)

<sup>5</sup> Gardezi (1970)

<sup>6</sup> Redistributive land reform legislation measure land area in terms of “production index units” or PIUs.

land is brought into more intensive use for physical infrastructure, industrial, commercial and residential purposes. This process appears to be in evidence in Pakistan. The returns on land ownership, moreover, are not simply of a straightforward economic nature. Control over land and its use is leveraged into advantage in broader spheres in the economy and politics. Despite the declining salience of crop farming and agrarian reform from the policy and political agendas, the ownership and possession of land remains an arena of intense contest.

This essay takes a broader and longer view of land and reform in Pakistan than the one offered by an agrarian perspective. Broadening the view means paying attention not only to crop-farming but to issues in the ownership, access and use of land for a range of economic purposes. Even within a traditional agrarian economy usufruct rights to uncultivated land were of immense economic value to local residents. In pastoral economies such as the ones that prevailed over much of Balochistan uncultivated land use as rangeland was the main economic resource. An exclusively agrarian focus also ignores the importance of homestead land to economic and social autonomy and broader entitlements.

There are good reasons also for taking a longer view. The agrarian reform agenda was operational for just over three decades from the mid 1940s till the late 1970s. This essay argues that most of the current issues in the political economy of land and reform in Pakistan can be traced back to the 1840s through four distinct historical rounds of dispossession, reform and resistance. These rounds are broadly chronological but not exactly sequential, and agrarian reform represents only one of the four rounds. A historical understanding reveals both continuity and important points of disjuncture.

The story begins in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century with colonial land settlements in that corner of the British Indian empire which is now Pakistan (Section 1). Independence from colonial rule and the break up of the British Indian empire corresponded with the second round. Migration and displacement associated with the partition of British India created human tragedies and economic opportunities – notably in control over land (Section 2). The third round refers to state-initiated attempts at administrative land reform spanning roughly three decades from 1949. These reforms, unlike the first round of changes in land systems, paid little explicit attention to the details of underlying social structures, or how these might change (Section 3).

The fourth round (Section 4) on which the bell is yet to ring is all about markets and private property rights. Its institutional context is marked by missionary zeal around the idea of creating land markets. The immediate economic context is the peculiar form of global capitalism that Pakistan is deemed to embrace – one lubricated by large and volatile flows of investible resources looking for quick returns. Predictably this round too is no walkover. Some of the salient conflicts in today's Pakistan can be interpreted quite reasonably as the clash of rivals in the fourth round. Many of those empowered or dispossessed in earlier rounds of reform are joined by new beneficiaries as well as victims. Political contests over land remains, and their outcomes remain far from certain.

This essay does not claim to provide policy recommendations – but only an interpretation of the history of land and reform, including the role of specific laws, policies and debates in altering the politics of control over land. It tries to document and analyze the diversity of land arrangements across the history and territory of Pakistan, while attempting to draw comparisons between regions and over time. Regions are agglomerated as “estates” and historical periods as “rounds”. A historical political economy approach is used here to comment on the political and institutional contexts of actors that contributed to the evolution of “structure” as we now know it.

The reader will detect common threads in the argument across “rounds” and “estates”. Dispossession and resistance are two such threads that relate to contemporary concerns about social marginalization and conflict management. These and other threads are not intended to move the narrative towards either determinism or prescription. There is nevertheless a normative expectation about the future, without attaching any weights or probabilities to its realization. It is that there will be a “round” in the story of land and reform in Pakistan when the politics of equal citizenship will play a role in shaping laws, policies and interventions. If and when this happens we will be able to speak about the first major institutional reform in land use after the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This essay will show that the contours of such a reform are discernible.

## 1. One State, Three Estates

The British colonial land settlement can be taken as a point of departure for the study of land and reform in Pakistan. At the time of independence the land currently constituting Pakistan was divided into several administrative jurisdictions consisting of three provinces (western portion of Punjab, Sindh and the North-West Frontier Province), several “native” states (including Khairpur, Bahawalpur, Dir, and Swat), a number of self-governing tribal areas, the territory of British Balochistan, and the Khanate of Kalat.<sup>7</sup> The three provinces – Punjab, Sindh and NWFP – and the territory of British Balochistan were relatively well-integrated into the colonial system of governance, and they formed the core of the post-colonial state in Pakistan.<sup>8</sup> Other territories (native states, self-governing tribal areas, and the Khanate of Kalat) were ultimately assimilated into the existing provinces, or were brought under the direct administrative control of the federal government.

The three provinces and British Balochistan, as they existed on the eve of independence provide us with useful vantage points into the institutional trajectory of land and reform. Present-day Pakistan consists of four provinces and several Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA). Land administration and land reform are provincial subjects. In reality, the institutional genealogy of the four provinces and FATA can be traced back to broadly three types of arrangements. Despite great geographical and social difference, there was in fact institutional continuity between Punjab, NWFP and British Balochistan. The NWFP was in fact part of the Punjab province until 1901 when it was given the status of a separate province with its headquarters in Peshawar.<sup>9</sup> British Balochistan too was brought under colonial rule through Punjab and civil and military officials from that province played a critical role in its establishment and integration into the British Indian empire.<sup>10</sup> Sindh, however, had been part of the Bombay Presidency until 1936 when it was awarded the status of a full province.

As new territories were brought under colonial control they were subjected to military and then civil administration. The district-wise “land settlement” or the recording of land revenue liabilities was a prime concern of the incoming colonial administration not only for raising revenue, but for establishing its political base. In the process these settlements began to define systems of land ownership and use, and recognized and assigned property rights to diverse stakeholders. The colonial land settlement often involved a long process of documentation, survey and negotiation, and was

---

<sup>7</sup> The Federally Administered Northern Areas and Azad Jammu and Kashmir belonged to the former native state of Jammu and Kashmir. These two regions are administered under different arrangements within Pakistan, but are not formally incorporated into the state. From the point of view of law and statistics FANA and AJK are treated as distinct entities from the rest of Pakistan. These regions taken together constitute around 3 per cent of the population of Pakistan, and this study will make no further reference to them.

<sup>8</sup> Pakistan in 1947 also included East Bengal which later became East Pakistan, before emerging, after a bitter struggle, as the sovereign state of Bangladesh in 1971. This essay deals only with that part of the state that remains Pakistan today.

<sup>9</sup> There are provincially administered tribal areas (PATA) within the boundaries of the NWFP, which share institutional features with FATA.

<sup>10</sup> The province, comprising the northern segments of present-day Balochistan was established as a result of inroads made by Robert Sandeman, a military-administrative officer based in Dera Ghazi Khan in the Punjab province.

underpinned by the administrative and coercive power of the British colonial state in India. In the areas where the settlement was carried out it was the most significant reform in institutional and distributional arrangements, representing the formalization of property rights in land within a modern administrative framework. The settlement, therefore, can be seen as the point of departure for any historical analysis of land and reform.

The territory making up Pakistan experienced broadly three distinct colonial approaches to land administration: tribal, *mahalwari* and *ryotwari*.<sup>11</sup> Pakistan's land mass consists of two main geographical divisions: the Indus basin plains and the trans-Indus uplands. The Indus basin represents an integrated hydraulic region including the plains of NWFP, Punjab, Sindh and parts of Balochistan. These plains include the bulk of the country's population and agricultural output. The rugged uplands to the west of the Indus include most of Balochistan, FATA and parts of the NWFP. These are expansive but sparsely populated regions which were remote corners of the British Indian empire.

### **The First Estate - Collective Tribal Ownership and Self-Governance**

There were large areas – comprising a majority of the land mass but not the population – where the colonial land settlement did not take place. Virtually all of present-day Balochistan (except parts of Quetta) and other tribal territories adjacent to the NWFP and Punjab were never officially settled for land revenue. In some of these areas, such as the Khanate of Kalat and its vassal states of Kharan, Mekran and Lasbela, or the native states of Khairpur, Bahawalpur, Dir and Swat, native administrations had their own systems of revenue and land records.<sup>12</sup> In Kalat, for example, the Khanate was structured in the form of a tribal federation, and tribes were recognized as exercising collective ownership over land, and collective liabilities of revenue and tribute.

Tribes self-governed their internal arrangements for apportioning crop and livestock shares between various claimants. There was a strong sense of collective ownership over large tracts of uncultivated land by descendants of common ancestors who were organized into a tribe or sub-tribe. Cultivated land was recognized as having individual owners, but these too traced their lineage origins to common ancestors who had brought the land into private use through investment. The collective identity of the tribe or clan remained intact even through the division of land into individually self-cultivated parcels. There were elaborated arrangements too for the collection and distribution of rents for use of the tribe's collective resources. Outside pastoralists were allowed passage or access to rangeland in return for tributes paid to tribal leaders. In some forest regions there were well-established systems for the sharing of timber royalties among tribe members.

---

<sup>11</sup> Martin (1956)

<sup>12</sup> The same was the case in the native states of Khairpur and Bahawalpur – adjacent to the provinces of Sindh and Punjab respectively. Variations between these two states and their corresponding provinces are instructive. Unlike Dir, Swat and other entities to the west of the Indus, these two Indus basin regions were integrated quickly and fully into the provincial system in the mid-1950s. For the purposes of this essay, therefore, Khairpur and Bahawalpur will not receive special attention, and the first estate will refer to all of Balochistan, FATA and PATA areas.

The British colonial approach to regions defined here as the “first estate” was tempered by political expediency. These were areas where colonial expansion faced significant armed resistance. The interests of the colonial state too were limited to strategic objectives such as securing lines of military logistics to imperial borders, ensuring reliable lines of communication, and keeping out other foreign powers. It is no coincidence that British governance structures in these regions were designed by military officers. The key idea – which in the case of Balochistan and Kalat was summarized as “the Forward Policy” – was to bring territories within the sovereign ambit of the colonial state through the coercion and cooptation of tribes as collective entities<sup>13</sup>. In other words, the existing pattern of colonial administration as it had evolved in the provinces was modified to allow for a hands-off state and tribal self-governance.

In British Balochistan and parts of tribal southern Punjab this meant the designation of the territory into different types of jurisdictions. The country was divided into “A” and “B” areas respectively. The former – which were relatively few – were to be governed, ultimately, to the standards of “settled” districts. The latter were largely self-governing even though they were formally part of British territory. Here the key governance concept was collective responsibility of tribes for maintaining law and order, and internal self-governance. The land systems in the “B” areas were not subjected to formal settlements and the colonial state accepted, by default, traditional claims of collective ownership and control. The subsequent incorporation of the native states of Kalat in Balochistan, and Dir and Swat into NWFP followed the British policy of incomplete institutional integration.

In the event, the designated “A” areas were also integrated only partially into the formal system of governance. Quetta, for example, was the headquarters of British Balochistan and an important “A” area, and a land settlement was carried out in the district. This was never completed, however, and government acquisition of land for essential infrastructure (such as the airport) was challenged by local tribes who did not accept the findings of the land settlement. In some cases the tribes were able to extract an implicit recognition of their claim by successfully demanding compensation.<sup>14</sup>

### **The Second Estate – *Mahalwari* in Punjab and “Settled” NWFP**

While the “first estate” is mostly in the highlands west of the Indus, the Indus basin was further divided into two distinct types of colonial land settlements. The northern part of the Indus (Punjab and NWFP) were conquered by the British in the late 1840s by armies of the Bengal Presidency marching westwards across the northern Indian plains. Punjab was ruled by the descendants of Maharaja Ranjit Singh. Sindh was captured from the Talpur dynasty in 1843 by a naval expeditionary force sent out from Bombay in order to secure logistic routes to Afghanistan<sup>15</sup>.

British colonial presence in India was nearly a century old by the time that the Indus basin was brought under its direct administrative control. There was an established

---

<sup>13</sup> Esposito (1974).

<sup>14</sup> Gazdar (2007a).

<sup>15</sup> Wong (1973).

tradition and method for conducting land settlements. There were extensive debates within the colonial administration about the approach to land settlement in the newly acquired territories. These debates were informed by investigative surveys conducted by colonial officers who worked with land administration officials of the deposed regimes to prepare a record of existing land systems and stakeholders. The debates were also influenced by the experience of previous land settlements in other parts of colonial India.

In Punjab (and settled NWFP), the colonial administrators decided to implement the *mahalwari* system of land revenue.<sup>16</sup> This system was based on recognizing the village as the basic unit of land administration. The *mahalwari* system was in place in the western parts of what is now Uttar Pradesh, and Punjab was seen as an administrative extension of north-central India. The introduction of *mahalwari* in the later additions to the Bengal Presidency came after an acknowledgment on the part of the colonial government that the earliest land revenue systems (the *zamindar*-based Permanent Settlement of Bengal) had failed to create incentives for agricultural improvement.<sup>17</sup>

Colonial officials surveying Punjab argued that the village already existed as a coherent and robust unit of land and social administration. What remained to be done was to document local variations and assign revenue liabilities and political responsibility to specific individuals, families, castes and classes. It was acknowledged from the outset that in some parts of Punjab – notably the southwestern region which now constitutes the southern part of Pakistani Punjab – the concept of the village was less well-established than the central and northern regions. Here the predominant social unit was the well around which populations were settled.

The village-based system of land settlement had three important features. First, the village was the basic unit of land revenue liability, and hence the basic unit of land holding. Villages could, of course, be shared between several landholders, in which case they shared the responsibility for land revenue, and were recorded as joint holders of the village. The land of a village would include cropped area, residential land as well as uncultivated land in private or collective use. Second, the village register was the record not only of land but of the entire village populace, including landholders, but also tenants, labourers, and people belonging to non-farm professions and trades. Third, the village was treated as the basic unit of administration - not only for the purposes of land revenue, but for all civil purposes.

Land settlement officers were always at pains to point out that their primary task was to identify, record and formalize existing arrangements of land holding and revenue liability. Local variations in the general village model were scrupulously noted and incorporated into district-wise settlements.<sup>18</sup> At least three different types of *mahalwari* arrangements were used. A *zamindari* village was one where the entire village land was the revenue responsibility of just one landholding family. In villages where families had divided their holdings a *pattidari* arrangement was in operation. There were yet other villages where it was argued that the entire “body of the village”

---

<sup>16</sup> Baden-Powell (1892).

<sup>17</sup> Martin (1956).

<sup>18</sup> Nazir (1981)

was the joint holder of the village regardless of whether or not they claimed common ancestry. Such villages were known as *bhaichara* villages.

In fact, all three types of settlements were variants of landlord villages. The “village body” was meant to include only those families that claimed to be the possessors of land. The colonial officials used terms such as “land owners” but it is clear from the records that the institutions of private property did not actually exist. It was the self-acknowledged task of the settlement officials to identify the true possessors of the land and to record them as its “owners” through their individual or joint ownership of the *mahal* or the village. The mention of collective ownership in the settlement records actually referred to joint possession among a sub-set of all residents who claimed to be the landlords. It was taken as given that there will be other residents belonging to subaltern castes and classes whose position would be subservient to that of the recognized village land holders. In determining rival and contested claims of village land holding, the revenue officials paid explicit attention to political power, lineage, right of possession through conquest, and caste hierarchy.<sup>19</sup>

Although the stated purpose of the settlement was to assign revenue tax liability, its effect was to confer private property rights in land to various classes of landholders. Before the colonial land settlements, there was no clear notion of the alienability of land. This can be seen from the fact that while discussing the provenance of any particular claim of land holding the key tests were actual possession (existing hierarchy of rights within a village) and the right of possession through conquest (genealogical tracing of invaders), but not any record of sale or purchase. It is not altogether surprising that the alienability of land – or accepting ownership rights of land holders – quickly led to actual alienation of land.<sup>20</sup> Within a few decades of the land settlements the colonial government in Punjab faced protests on the part of the “farming community” against the debt-induced alienation of land to urban money-lenders. Its response was to enact the Punjab Alienation Act of 1900, which classified rural society into “cultivator” and “non-cultivator” castes and tribes, and restricted the transfer of land ownership from the former to the latter.<sup>21</sup>

Individual private property rights, therefore, were introduced in the favour of the landholders, and then modified to protect this same class. The land settlement in Punjab elevated the landholders but marginalized all other rural classes. Agricultural tenants, labourers, and non-cultivating service castes of various types that had traditionally enjoyed claims to the produce of land alongside the landholders were now dispossessed. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century the “non-agricultural” castes made up around half of the total population of Punjab. The majority among these “non-agriculturalists” comprised the so-called “vagrant and menial castes” that actually performed much of the hard labour within and outside the agrarian economy.<sup>22</sup> Even among the half of the population that made up “agricultural” castes, only a minority were landholders – others were tenants of various types. Thus, the landholders’ advantage over other classes which was previously tempered by a system of

---

<sup>19</sup> Baden-Powell (1892).

<sup>20</sup> Ali (1989).

<sup>21</sup> See Ali (1989) on the protests and the promulgation of the Punjab Alienation of Land Act of 1900.

<sup>22</sup> The first population census in 1881 reported in Ibbetson (1883) pp 28-29.

customary obligations was both magnified and qualitatively intensified when land was legally accepted as their property.

The Punjab settlement was overtly guided by political considerations. The colonial government consciously sought to create a class of loyal landowners consisting of the middle- and large- income peasantry. By freezing the hierarchy actually observed at a given moment in time into a perpetual contract through the creation of private property rights, the colonial settlement put in place considerable hurdles before the subaltern castes and classes. Whereas before the land system would have been subject to negotiation and change in response to changing local economic and political conditions, now the administrative machinery of the modern colonial state was geared towards preserving the particular balance of political power that happened to have prevailed in the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Punjab.

The treatment of “uncultivated land” had similar implications. Uncultivated land adjacent to the surveyed village was assigned to the estate – and rights over this land were understood to be in proportion with the ownership rights over the village itself. The *shaamilat*, as the uncultivated area of the village was known, was not the communal property of all villagers, but the joint property of the “village body” – that is, the landholders who were recognized in the settlement as revenue-payers and, by extension, as owners. Large parts of the country, particularly the *rakh* or the higher land away from the riverine tracts was classified as “uncultivated waste” and designated as government property.<sup>23</sup>

The fact is that this land in the *doabs* (territory between two rivers) was inhabited by semi-pastoral communities. The canal development in the *doabs* of western Punjab that was initiated in the 1880s, and became one of the most extensive programmes for land colonization of its type, was premised on government ownership of the *rakh*. While the land settlement process might not have anticipated the economic value of the *rakh*, it did lay down the basis for the dispossession of its inhabitants who were termed as *jaanglee* (jungle-dwellers). Once developed, the land was made available to the same classes and castes that had been the primary beneficiaries of the colonial settlement in the first instance.

Canal colonization led to the introduction of a new form of land administration in Punjab. Most of the land brought under irrigation through canal works was the property of the provincial revenue department, and a special “colonization” department was set up within land revenue administration to manage this newly developed land. Villages remained units of land administration in the pattern of *mahalwari*, but land was parceled into plots for allotment to individuals.

The notion of the “village body” was retained but its functions were diluted, since individuals held legal title to their own plots. Some of the corporate features of the old villages remained. Residential plots were allotted to cultivators in designated canal colony villages in proportion to their ownership of agricultural land. Non-cultivator castes were excluded from farm land ownership, and also, effectively, from ownership of residential plots. They had to reside either with their employers, or in a specially designated quarter of the village where their stay remained contingent on

---

<sup>23</sup> Baden-Powell (1892), Vol 2, p 546

them being recognized as “village servants” or at least dependents of identified groups of landowners. The position of the *lambardar*<sup>24</sup> was also present in the canal colony villages where he remained a gatekeeper of access to state resources. In fact, great efforts were undertaken that the entire village social organization was transplanted intact from districts of emigration to the canal colonies.

Canal colonization was a massive engineering enterprise which was technologically progressive but socially conservative.<sup>25</sup> Cheema and Siddiqi (2007) have examined in detail the evolution of “proprietary” and “canal colony” villages in the central Punjab district of Sargodha.<sup>26</sup> They found that the “canal colony” model had led to far greater political and economic dynamism, particularly among the cultivator castes, than the “proprietary” villages. While these results are intuitive, the counter-factual questions remain: was the social transformation potential of irrigation development in Punjab deliberately stunted through the retention of existing hierarchies – albeit in a somewhat diluted form?

### **The Third Estate – Ryotwari in Sindh**

While the *mahalwari* or village-based settlement was one response to the perceived failures of the *zamindar*-based Permanent Settlement of Bengal, colonial administrators of the Madras Presidency in southern India provided another solution in the form of the *ryotwari* or cultivator-based settlement.<sup>27</sup> The word *ryot* or *raiyyat* literally means cultivator or peasant. The state would survey the land (and not villages or other forms of social organization) and assign revenue liability to the actual cultivators without going through any intermediary. One of the major criticisms of the Bengal Permanent Settlement, after all, was that it had created a class of absentee landlords who maximized their rental incomes at the expense of the *ryot* and state alike.

The *ryotwari* system appealed to the early 19<sup>th</sup> century sensibilities of British colonial officers for its simplicity and efficiency. Unlike the *zamindar*-based Permanent Settlement, this system did not recognize or create a class of intermediaries. Revenue liability was affixed to specific plots of land, and this created perfect incentives for cultivators to maximize their output. Unlike *mahalwari* this system also did not require the existence of village communities or the state’s detailed involvement in documenting the structure of rights and claims within villages. Initially the leases were for specific periods of up to five years. Subsequent leases were for longer periods. This system promised to be the closest to a market in land. The *ryotwari* system was implemented all over the Madras Presidency and was also adopted in the Bombay Presidency. Parts of the Bengal Presidency too were brought under *ryotwari*.

For all its promise, however, the devil was in the detail. When colonial revenue officials began to survey Sindh, which was governed from the Bombay Presidency,

---

<sup>24</sup> The *lambardar* was an honorary government official in charge of revenue collection and control of village affairs

<sup>25</sup> Ali (1989).

<sup>26</sup> Cheema and Siddiqi (2007).

<sup>27</sup> Baden-Powell (1892), Vol 3.

they were confronted with a double dilemma. The traditional system of cultivation and revenue-apportioning observed in the province was based on at least two key stakeholders: *zamindars* (landholders) and *haaris* (cultivators). This suggested that in the normal *ryotwari* scheme the *haari* ought to have been recognized as the *ryot* and had the revenue settled with him. In effect, this would have assigned land ownership rights to the *haari*. But it was the *zamindar* who was traditionally responsible for collecting the state's share (*batai*) in the crop. The Sindh *zamindars* were also entitled a small share (usually 1/16<sup>th</sup> of the crop) as their own share known as the *laapo*. The right to *laapo* was traced back to the *zamindar*'s investment in making the land cultivable (through irrigation works) and for overlordship and protection of the *haari*. The overlordship claim was often a tribal one when the *zamindar* was the head of the tribe or clan to which the *haaris* belonged.

The simple *ryotwari* scheme had hit a problem. Given the nature of shifting cultivation around river inundations, and local canals and earthworks excavated off the riverbed, there arose considerable confusion about the status of the *zamindar* and the *haari*. The Sindh *zamindar* was obviously not the absentee rent collector of the Bengal type. His active involvement in cultivation remained considerable. Yet, it was the *haari* who was the tiller of the soil.<sup>28</sup> It was also clear that the primary division of the harvest (*batai*) was between the *haari* and the state, with the *zamindar* acting as an active participant and intermediary for which he received his *laapo*. No help was to be had from the *mahalwari* system either to resolve this confusion. The nature of the agrarian geography in Sindh precluded the existence of villages of long standing. The settlement could not easily identify the real *ryot*, nor could it find a durable village which would collectively assume revenue responsibility and around which the hierarchy of rights of the *zamindar* and *haari* might be documented.

The problem, of course, was not with the organization of Sindh agriculture. It was what it was, and had served the economic needs of the agrarian classes and the state to a lesser or greater extent. The problem was with the Indo-centric approach of the British colonial settlement which demanded the agrarian structure of a far-off corner of the imperial domain to obediently submit itself to prior administrative categories. Since this was not going to happen, and a decision needed to be taken, the colonial officials developed the thesis that the *haari* was "but a serf of the soil".<sup>29</sup> The Sindh *zamindar* was recognized as the landholder and cultivator – that is, as the *ryot* with whom the *ryotwari* settlement could be made. Private property in land had been introduced and its principal beneficiary was the *zamindar*. At a stroke, the Sindhi *haari* was actually turned into a serf of *zamindar*.

The treatment of uncultivated area was somewhat different from Punjab. The principle that the government was the residual owner of uncultivated land – or land for which revenue was not settled with a *ryot* – was carried over from *mahalwari*. However, *ryotwari* was different in that there was no provision for uncultivated land to be owned collectively as *shaamilat* by a village community, as the land administration system did not make reference to social organization. Initially the government encouraged individuals to take up leases for uncultivated area at reduced

---

<sup>28</sup> The word *haari* literally means ploughman.

<sup>29</sup> Cheesman (1997).

rates – to promote an expansion in cultivated area. These attempts were mostly unsuccessful.

Like in Punjab, uncultivated land was not only in use, it was also regarded as the common property of particular tribes. These claims were set aside for the most part, particularly in areas where the tribal social organization was weak. In Sindh too, as in Punjab, later investment in irrigation would benefit the classes that had already been empowered by the colonial settlement at the expense of other users of the land. The government also came to own large tracts of land which could be awarded to political beneficiaries such as military and civil administrative personnel, and migrants from outside the province.

## 2. Evacuation, Ejection and the Market

### Evacuation

The partition of British India created human tragedies but also economic dislocation. The history of land in Pakistan is incomplete without an acknowledgment of the scale of dispossession associated with the partition of British India and the displacement of the population.<sup>30</sup> “Partition studies” have helped to piece together fragments of the history of those momentous years and the experiences of individuals and communities. What remains to be properly acknowledged and understood, however, is the long term impact of dispossession and re-settlement on Pakistan’s land economy.

Partition related displacement directly contributed to the alienation of hitherto unprecedented areas of land from its original owners, for re-allotment to incoming displaced people from the other side of the border. Both in absolute and relative terms, the impact was much greater in Pakistan than India. In Punjab there was a virtual policy of “communal cleansing” with the state on both sides of the partition boundary actively encouraging and facilitating the “transfer” of population. Within a few years of the partition, western Punjab in Pakistan was virtually empty of Hindus and Sikhs, while negligible numbers of Muslims were “left behind” in eastern Punjab in India.

It was estimated that displaced Hindus and Sikhs left between 6 and 8 million acres of agricultural land in areas that became Pakistan, while Muslims from eastern Punjab claimed to have abandoned a total of some 4.5 million acres.<sup>31</sup> While there is less evidence of state-sponsored communal cleansing in Sindh, large numbers of Hindus fled to India anyway due to the insecurity induced by the partition. It is estimated that in this migration, some 1.3 million acres were abandoned by displaced persons or “evacuees”. In fact, unlike Punjab, where much of the communal cleansing and dispossession took place within a few months of the partition, in Sindh the process continued for decades, with further displacement and dispossession occurring during the Pakistan-India wars of 1965 and 1971.

Taking lower estimates, partition-related displacement effected the change in ownership of some 7 million acres. This is equivalent to 18 per cent of total cropped area at the time, and nearly twice as high as all land subsequently acquired by the state under ceiling laws.<sup>32</sup> The figure is higher than the total acreage of state-owned land allotted in Pakistan since 1947.<sup>33</sup>

---

<sup>30</sup> It is estimated that a total of 13 million people were displaced between what is currently Pakistan and India – 5 million are estimated to have fled Pakistan for India, and 7.9 million from India to Pakistan (Schechtman, 1951, p 406, based on interviews with respective ministries for refugees in the two states). Pakistan’s population census of 1951 gives a lower figure (6.5 million) of refugees in Pakistan. This, nevertheless, constituted a fifth of the total population of the country in 1951 (Government of Pakistan, 1951, p31).

<sup>31</sup> Schechtman (1951) p 406, cites Indian government sources which claim that Hindus and Sikhs abandoned 8 million acres in Punjab alone. Pakistani sources admitted that some 6 million acres were left behind by non-Muslim evacuees in Punjab (Maniruzzaman, 1966, p 92). Ayesha Jalal (1990) p 87, cites secondary sources as estimating that Sindhi Hindus abandoned 1.35 million acres.

<sup>32</sup> Lieftinck et al (1968), p 16, estimated total cropped area in 1965 as 40 million acres. Currently it is

Partition related dispossession and subsequent resettlement was arguably a more important influence on the politics of land in Pakistan than the land reforms that followed it. It is helpful to understand the historical antecedents of the land economy in Punjab and Sindh before the partition. Without such historical understanding it becomes easy to treat the partition-related dispossession as an idiosyncratic, if tragic, interregnum in an otherwise smooth narrative of economic development and modernization. Not paying due attention to partition-related dispossession also leads to misunderstanding the antecedents of subsequent land reforms, the development of land markets, and the continuing conflict and contests over land.

The development of canal colonies from the 1880s onwards had changed both the geography and demography of western Punjab. All of the colonization was in western Punjab, while most of the “high density” districts that had been identified by the state for land allotment were in central and eastern Punjab. A large part of the partition-related dispossession was from the canal colonies where migrants from eastern districts had been settled. After 1947 a communalized colonization process was speeded up and completed. Sikh and Hindu settlers were “evacuated”, many of them to their “original” home districts in eastern Punjab. Muslim displaced persons from eastern Punjab were quickly settled in their places.

There was considerable displacement too in the non-canal colony areas, particularly in the north and north-central parts of the province. In these areas, as in the canal colonies, land ownership was already socially segmented. It is worth recalling that land ownership was restricted to officially recognized “cultivator” castes – Jat, Rajput, Gujjar, Arain as well as castes such as the Syeds who were acknowledged as landowners. In western Punjab this implied the virtual exclusion of Hindus from agricultural land ownership. The establishment of private property in land after the colonial settlement prompted the so-called traditional cultivators to agitate for protective legislation. Such protection came in the form of the Punjab Alienation of Land Act of 1900, which recognized some castes as traditional cultivators and prohibited the alienation of land to non-cultivating castes. The social target of the mobilization had been the mostly-Hindu mercantile castes that had begun to acquire ownership of land through debt and mortgage. In some ways the partition-related dispossession continued the social consolidation of land ownership - now not only in terms of caste but also in terms of religious communities.

In Sindh, land administration did not pay explicit attention to caste. The *ryotwari* settlement did not encourage a social perspective in the administration of land in any case. Here the agrarian classes were dominated by the Muslims at the outset. Apart from the eastern desert regions of the province where Hindus constituted a majority, the Sindhi Hindus mostly consisted of urban, mercantile and professional castes. Sindh had been ruled by Muslim dynasties for centuries before the British colonial invasion. At the time of the colonial land settlement it was recorded that virtually all of the *zamindars* (in whose favour the settlement was made) were Muslims. With the institution of private property rights in land, the picture began to change somewhat.

---

estimated at around 48 million acres (Agricultural Census Organization, 2003).

<sup>33</sup> Figures for ceiling surplus land acquired by government under land reforms legislation, and other state-owned land allotted up to 2001 were supplied by the Federal Land Commission.

As in Punjab, a process of “alienation” started as landowners began to mortgage their property to non-agrarian creditors. By the 1940s, Sindhi Muslim *zamindars* were already in battle-cry against the mortgaging and “alienation” of land to Hindu Vanyas. Unlike Punjab, however, legislative protection was not forthcoming or likely.

The alienation of Sindhi Muslim land through debt and mortgage did figure as an important issue in the political mobilization in favour of Pakistan. Sindhi Muslim leaders had scored a victory in 1935 when their lobbying with the British government had resulted in the separation of Sindh from the Bombay Presidency. For many Sindhi Muslim landowners partition-induced displacement of Sindhi Hindus was seen as a form of redress against the prior alienation of land to them. It was estimated that in the initial period after the partition, some 1.3 million acres were abandoned by Hindu landowners. There were charges that out of this area, between 300,000 to 800,000 acres were occupied by local landlords.<sup>34</sup>

The period immediately following the 1947 dispossession was one of considerable confusion as well as contest over land. Government policy towards displacement and dispossession was communal and politicized. The governments of Pakistan and India concluded agreements relating to “evacuee” property.<sup>35</sup> These agreements were based on an implicit principle of communal reciprocity. The state became the legal custodian of lands left behind by displaced persons. These lands were allotted to evacuees coming from the other side, against claims of properties they had left behind. The claims would be investigated and verified, respectively by the two governments through departments specially set up for the purpose of dealing with “evacuee property”.

### **Ejection and Resettlement**

Case studies of the politics of “evacuee property” management in two districts – one in the canal colony district of Faisalabad in Punjab, and the other also in an irrigated area in the Sanghar district of Sindh – are illustrative. These two cases are based on several rounds of fieldwork conducted in the respective areas between 2001 and 2006.<sup>36</sup>

#### *Sikh Fauji Chak*

Akalipur is a classic canal colony village in the wheat-cotton belt of Faisalabad. It was settled in the early part of the previous century by Sikh families from Hoshiarpur District in eastern Punjab, who were awarded the land in recognition of their military services. The village was known as a *Sikh Fauji Chak* (Sikh military village). The Sikh landowners had brought with them some village servants from their home

---

<sup>34</sup> The lower estimate is from Maniruzzaman (1966) p 92, while the higher one was cited in Jalal (1990) p 87.

<sup>35</sup> Schechtman (1951).

<sup>36</sup> The first round of fieldwork was conducted for a background paper for the World Bank Pakistan Poverty Assessment (World Bank, 2001 and Gazdar, 2002). Subsequent fieldwork in these areas was conducted for a study on the drivers of rural poverty reduction for the Asian Development Bank (Gazdar, 2006), and another study on social marginalization and schooling (Budhani et al forthcoming).

districts. These included a Muslim blacksmith. Other farm servants – no better than serfs – included several families of “low caste” menial workers. One of these had converted into a *Mazhabi Sikh*, while the others known as *masihis* had converted to Christianity.<sup>37</sup> At the time of the partition there were riots in the area, and the Christians were told to wear crosses so that Muslim and Sikh mobs would not bother them.

The Sikh families, alongwith their Mazhabi Sikh servant left for Hoshiarpur. The Mazhabi Sikh servant was somewhat privileged among the farm servants due to his religious proximity to the masters, and had acquired his own homestead. When leaving for Hoshiarpur he gifted the property to the Masihi Christians. The Muslim blacksmith of the Sikh landlords chose to remain in the village. For some months the only people left in the village were the Christian farm servants and the Muslim blacksmith, until the arrival of some Dogar families in the area. The Dogars were from the same village in Hoshiarpur as the Sikhs, and were led to the village by the Muslim blacksmith from their home district, who now became their servant.

Subsequently, more families of displaced people began to arrive from eastern Punjab. One group consisted of Jat families that had claims of substantial land holdings in India. One of them, in fact, had been a *nambardar* in his village.<sup>38</sup> He made a successful bid for the local *nambardari*, and the Jats replaced the Dogars as the new dominant groups. The Jats brought their own Muslim farm servants and other service castes – including barbers, carpenters and blacksmiths – from their home village in India.

### *Deh Jhoke*

Deh Jhoke comprises over a dozen villages and hamlets in the command area of the Sukkur barrage in Sanghar district. The land here was irrigated and opened up for settlement in the 1930s. A number of castes and clans have resided in the area for several generations. They include Talpurs, Wassans, Bheels, and a number of other groups. Of the local residents, only the Talpurs and Wassans own significant areas of land – large tracts belong to non-resident landowners. Most of the poorer clans work as share-tenants or *haaris* for the local as well as the absentee landlords. Some of these, including the Scheduled Caste Hindu Bheels, have been settled on this land since the 1980s.

At the time of the partition, most of the area in the *deh* was the property of a Vanya Hindu family. The Wassans and Talpurs also owned some land, but the Hindu Vanya dominated all others in terms of land ownership, and maintained a large farmhouse. In 1947, following widespread violence the Hindu Vanya owners abandoned their

---

<sup>37</sup> Mazhabi Sikh literally means “religious Sikh” – it was a common euphemism for “low-caste” converts who were accepted into the Sikh community as fellow-religionists but not as social equals. There was analogous treatment by Muslim upper castes in Punjab of “low-caste” converts who were called Muslim Shaikh – to emphasize that the link with them was only religious and not social.

<sup>38</sup> The *nambardar* is a landowner in a village who is appointed by the revenue department as its honorary representative. It is the *nambardar*’s responsibility to collect land revenue on the behalf of all village “owners”. *Nambardaris* are usually passed in inheritance. During the partition, the government of Pakistan recognized claims of *nambardari* left behind in India and awarded these in the villages of settlement.

rural property and remained in the local town. After some time they left the country altogether. In the immediate aftermath of the partition, the former *haaris* of the Hindu Vanya landlords assumed control of their holdings and began to cultivate these as their own property. They claim to have been encouraged by the government to do so. One elderly Bheel respondent said that “Jinnah promised us this land when Pakistan was made”.

This situation persisted for some seven or eight years until a new group of outsiders arrived. These were displaced people from Indian Punjab who had been allotted “evacuee property” in Jhoke. The Bheels and other former *haaris* were told that they could continue to farm the land as tenants of the incoming claimants, but they were no longer the owners. Most of them chose to become tenants once again. The new Punjabi owners had the backing of the revenue department and of state personnel.

In the 1970s and 1980s there was ferment in the area – firstly due to the formation of an elected government that altered tenancy laws in favour of the tenants, and then due to a political movement against the military regime that replaced the elected government. The anti-military movement led to the targeting of Punjabi landlords, who were considered to be complicit with the military regime due to their ethnic links with state personnel. During this period the Punjabi landowners were put under pressure and were unable to manage their estates effectively. Some of them decided to sell off their lands, and it is then that a number of the poor landless, including some Bheel families managed to acquire small plots. It is thought that in the politically disturbed environment the price was negotiated to the advantage of the buyers.

### *Discussion*

The story of the Sikh Fauji Chak village at Akalipur illustrates that even through a period of intense turmoil, there was historical continuity in the process of evacuation and resettlement. The cultivating caste Sikhs who had first arrived in Akalipur as a result of the canal colony settlements were privileged over other castes such as the service and servant castes in their access to land. Caste and class hierarchies were carefully preserved in this Punjab village when the landowners were forced to flee. The “low caste” Muslim blacksmith and Christian farm servants made no attempt to claim any land. They found themselves in subservient positions once again, now to Muslim landowners, some of whom actually originated in the very village from where the Fauji Sikhs had come.

In Jhoke too the process of dealing with partition-induced displacement was hierarchical and political. Between evacuation and resettlement there was an interim process of ejection – when local stakeholders who may even have contributed to the evacuation of the original owners were themselves removed in order to make room for claimants from India. Historical accounts suggest that what happened in Jhoke was not an isolated case. Refugee organizations agitated continuously throughout the 1950s for their “right” to land compensation. Moreover, the contest between the locals and the migrants was not restricted to Sindh. There were reports from Punjab too of tenant farmers of former “evacuees” resisting the allotment of their plots to the

refugees.<sup>39</sup> The refugees won, but perhaps only temporarily, in 1958 when a military government came down firmly on their side and enforced the law in their favour.<sup>40</sup>

Partition-induced dispossession preserved social inequities in land while adding further layers of marginalization: religious community, and migrant status. Upper caste Sikhs and Hindus who had previously shared the privileges of status alongside their Muslim counterparts were now among the dispossessed. The potential contest between migrants and indigenous communities that was summarily dealt with in the western Punjab *doabs* through the marginalization of the *jaanglees* came to a head in Sindh.

An unintended consequence of partition-induced dispossession was the openings it created in the land market across the country. Primary fieldwork in a number of rural sites in Pakistan has revealed that refugee claimants sold their lands to local landowners and landless alike, particularly in those areas where they were not a numerically dominant group. This was the case, as seen above, in Deh Jhoke in Sindh, where the refugees' economic position became insecure due to political changes.

In many rural areas of Punjab too – other than canal colony villages, where entire communities of refugees lived together and formed political majorities – refugees gradually sold out to local residents. These land sales often created openings for local marginalized groups to gain their first footholds on the property ladder. Unlike their dealings with dominant local castes which often involved uncertainty regarding contract enforcement, the marginalized groups were able to conduct more secure transactions with the refugee “outsiders” who despite their “higher” social status were not well-connected enough with the local administration to bend the market in their favour. In socially-segmented and politically-mediated markets, evacuee land in the hands of refugees became a resource pool into which the poor could also dip their toes sometimes.

---

<sup>39</sup> “Ejected Tenants March on Lahore” (1956).

<sup>40</sup> Maniruzzaman (1966).

### 3. Agrarian Reform, Social Deform

Independence from colonial rule offered, in principle, a historic window of opportunity for a reform of economic and social institutions that were fashioned by the colonizers. In fact the large-scale dispossession and evacuation of non-Muslims in western Punjab and Sindh, and of Muslims in various parts of India, was one political response to the property rights arrangements sired by the colonial regime. Despite the violence, much of it cynical, the moment of formal decolonization was not entirely bereft of its own idealism. The period from around 1945 through the 1950s saw lively debates among political and policy circles on land reforms, culminating in the West Pakistan Land Reforms Regulation in February 1959.<sup>41</sup>

It is now customary to refer to the Muslim League as a party of feudal barons and landlords. Outside of Bengal, this characterization is probably correct. In Punjab the ranks of the Muslim League swelled when the Muslim members of the Unionist Party (a pro-British cross-communal gathering of the landed gentry) crossed over to its side. The Sindh Muslim League too was dominated by local notables – though a number of key figures were actually urban professionals and businessmen with few rural economic interests. It is possible, of course, that the early debates about land reform were merely lip-service – any reform that promised to reduce the power of the existing landed elite was always going to be a non-starter.<sup>42</sup> The debates and outcomes provide useful insights, nevertheless, on the politics of land and reform in the post-colonial period.

The period leading up to independence heard a great deal of discussion on the need for land reform across India, both within government and outside. The formation of elected provincial governments in 1937 which included representatives of the Congress and the Muslim League allowed the discussions that had raged in political circles to enter the policy domain. In the regions comprising Pakistan, a Tenancy Legislation Committee was formed in 1943 to make recommendations for improving the conditions of *haaris* (landless tenants).<sup>43</sup> The work of this committee was interrupted by the Second World War, and a Government Hari Enquiry Committee was formed on the even of independence in March 1947. Its recommendations were published in 1949, and the early 1950s saw a number of provincial tenancy regulation laws.

In 1949 the Agrarian Committee of the ruling Muslim League gave its detailed report on the conditions of agriculture and proposed a range of agrarian reforms. Provincial tenancy regulation laws took up some of the recommendations of the Muslim League committee. The theme of land reforms continued to be debated at various fora, including the First Five Year Plan (1955-1960), but it was nearly ten years later that the Land Reform Commission for West Pakistan took up the task in earnest. The commission was constituted by the incoming military junta immediately after the overthrow of civilian government in October 1958, adding weight to reformist claims of the military junta. The commission took account of earlier work, particularly that

---

<sup>41</sup> The law was enacted as Martial Law Regulation 64 and is known by its abbreviation MLR-64.

<sup>42</sup> Examples of this widely-held view include Khan (1981) and Zaidi (1999).

<sup>43</sup> Naqvi et al (1987).

of the First Five Year Plan, and reported its findings in January 1959. These became the basis for the Land Reforms Regulation enacted the following month.

The issues of land and reform were keenly contested in these various policy documents. One indication of the contest can be seen from the fact that the two landmark documents – the Sindh Government Hari Enquiry Committee report, and the Land Reform Commission – were both accompanied by alternative reports on the part of dissenting members of the drafting committees.

### **Strengthening Private Property**

The early land reforms had three main components: tenancy regulation, abolition of “superior” claims, and the redistribution of land held above a prescribed “ceiling”. All of the various committee reports cited above – save the M. Masud’s dissenting minute on the Hari Enquiry Committee – favoured the regulation of tenant-farming arrangements in general and the protection of the tenant in particular.<sup>44</sup> Recommended measures included tenancy security, protection from eviction, and higher crop shares for tenant farmers. There were also suggestions for converting tenant shares into cash rents. These measures, which were adopted to some degree in the tenancy regulation laws, were in line with earlier legislation dating back to the Punjab Tenancy Regulation law of 1887.

The abolition of “superior” claims – *jagirs* for the most part – were also in line with historic trends in British India towards the streamlining of land ownership laws. British colonial land settlements of the 19<sup>th</sup> century had attempted to “simplify” land holding by identifying particular classes as “owners”. Various aspects of the previous multi-layered claims on land – none of which were necessarily proprietary claims to the soil – survived colonial conquest and land settlement. The most important one was *jagirdari* or revenue-free status. These were lands that were exempt (by pre-colonial rulers) from the payment of revenue to the state. The British has continued the policy of awarding *jagirs* to powerful loyalists. “Superior” claims were seen as vestigial aberrations in a system arranged around straightforward private property rights and their abolition was a popular demand among nationalist politicians of all hues.

The most conspicuous feature of the early land reforms was the institution of land “ceilings” and the redistribution of surplus land. The fixing of the land ceiling was thought to be a key indicator of how ambitious or cautious the land reforms were going to be.<sup>45</sup> Much of subsequent debate too was about the affixation of relatively high land ceilings in the 1959 reforms, and the many loopholes that allowed landowners to evade the effect of these reforms.<sup>46</sup> In most areas the land ceiling allowed the retention of some 500 acres per person. It is estimated that some 2.5 million acres were taken over by the government, out of which 2.3 million acres were

---

<sup>44</sup> Masud opposed greater tenancy security as a half-way measure – he argued for the outright transfer of ownership rights to tenants (Naqvi et al 1987).

<sup>45</sup> The ceiling was referenced to land productivity – with a higher acreage allowed for non-irrigated and low quality land (Naqvi et al 1987).

<sup>46</sup> There was special provision for orchards, tubewell development and other purposes. Zaidi (1999) shows that the effective area that a landowner could actually retain was in the thousands of acres.

distributed among some 180,000 families. This amounted to around 5 per cent of the total farm area of the country. It was estimated that the “radical” view expressed by the dissenting officials of the time – that is, a lower land ceiling – would have yielded over three times as much land.<sup>47</sup>

The late 1960s saw ferment across Pakistan, as the regime constructed by General (later Field Marshall) Ayub Khan and his allies began to lose its political props. Perceptions of rising inequality alongside rapid economic growth were key factors in the declining legitimacy of the autocracy. Although the agrarian class politics were not at the forefront of an urban opposition movement, populist slogans of the time included many references to land reforms.<sup>48</sup> Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s Pakistan People’s Party (PPP) emerged victorious in western Pakistan in the elections held in 1970 and one of its promises was to renew land reforms. In 1972, fresh land reform laws were enacted – this was under Martial Law regulations, as the country did not return to constitutional government until 1973. Most of the 1972 reforms were an extension of the 1959 reforms – the major change was the lowering of the land ceiling.

The 1972 reforms lowered the effective ceiling to 150 acres in most places. They also closed some but not all of the loopholes that were present in the 1959 law. The area of land acquired by the state under these new land reforms was only around 1.3 million acres.<sup>49</sup> It has been argued that since Bhutto was a substantial landowner himself, he was not averse to protecting the interests of the landed gentry. Alternatively, it has been argued that he was dissatisfied with the progress of the 1972 reforms, and hence launched further measures in 1977, which were in effect aborted by his overthrow in a military coup soon after.<sup>50</sup> Subsequently, the principle of surplus land acquisition was questioned in the Federal Shariat Court on the grounds that it was contrary to Islamic injunctions. The challenge was upheld by the Supreme Court, effectively closing the chapter on further land reforms of this type.

### **Agrarian Versus Land Reform**

The conventional assessment of Pakistan’s post-colonial attempts at land reform – that the interests of the influential landowning classes prevailed over any radical ideas – is plausible but incomplete. A longer historical perspective combined with a broader institutional approach will show that attention to the details of what was said and done by whom, when, and on what grounds, can still be a source of insight into issues of contemporary relevance. It is important to examine not only what was said at the time, but also what remained unsaid and invisible.

There needs to be a critique of the very notion that discussion and policy on agrarian structure for around three decades from the mid-1940s onwards could be called “land

---

<sup>47</sup> Naqvi et al (1987).

<sup>48</sup> There was a debate between Hamza Alavi and Shahid Javed Burki (summarized in Zaidi, 1999) about the class basis, and derivatively, the possible role of the 1959 land reforms, in the political ferment of the 1960s. Both sides in the debate acknowledged, however, that the movement was mostly an urban one, and did not represent agrarian class conflict in any significant way.

<sup>49</sup> Naqvi et al (1987).

<sup>50</sup> Syed Qamaruzzaman Shah, the president of the Sindh Chamber of Agriculture, and a cabinet minister under Bhutto to the author in an interview (October 2003) that in 1977 Bhutto felt strong enough politically to take on and defeat the landowners’ lobby in his own camp.

reform”. In fact, the real reform in the institutional arrangements governing the use of land had already taken place at the time of the colonial settlement. The post-colonial discussion was merely about strengthening these very arrangements along the course already set by successive amendments and interventions since the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. There was virtually no discussion of the fundamental architecture of land administration let alone the societal engineering that the colonial land policies had set in motion. The “radicals” and the “conservatives” alike operated within a relatively narrow band of options within “agrarian reform” – this was no agenda of land or social reform.

What type of “agrarian reform” was it? A reading of the debates and policies suggests a remarkable agreement on all sides – at least in nominal terms – on the vision of an idyllic society of self-cultivating peasants. There was, in fact, nothing new in this romantic utopia. Colonial administrators over two centuries had waxed lyrical about the virtues – economic, political and moral – of the self-cultivating peasant society. In fact, much of what existed in Pakistan at the time of independence had been justified at some time or another with reference to the idyllic peasant community. The Punjab village which became the repository of land rights and social hierarchy, and the *zamindar-haari* system of Sindh, as well as all other variants had emerged from a discursive fascination with the self-cultivating peasant.

Perhaps the self-cultivating peasant model was flexible enough to accommodate all of these highly disparate outcomes precisely because it was fantastic. The reality was much more nuanced, and harsher to boot. The Punjab village had more non-cultivators – *kammis* and virtual slaves also known euphemistically as “agricultural labourers” – than actual landowners. The tenant farmer – in whom the colonial administrators and the post-colonial debaters saw visions of the future self-cultivating peasant – was only one segment of the dispossessed. In terms of class and caste, he was often closer to the small landowner than he was to the labouring classes.

### **Dispossessed Stay Out**

Interestingly, the landlord-dominated Agrarian Committee of the Muslim League was more aware of the actual conditions of the Punjab village than the bureaucrats who drafted the First Five Year Plan and the 1959 land reforms law.<sup>51</sup> The Muslim League politicians observed of the *kammi* and the labourer: “he is the menial of the landlord and he has to often struggle against the oppression of the peasantry. Even the protection of elementary human and moral rights is frequently denied to him”.<sup>52</sup> The committee recommended that this class of the rural society must be provided statutory protection and security of homestead rights. By contrast, the 1959 Land Reforms Commission which was staffed entirely by career bureaucrats acknowledged:

“We have not dealt with agricultural labour and the steps that should be taken for the amelioration of its condition. We do realise that this class of workers is almost entirely at the mercy of its employer [...] This, however, is a problem which, to our mind, is more akin to

---

<sup>51</sup> The convenor of the Muslim League committee was Mian Mumtaz Mohammad Daulatana, one of the largest landowners in Punjab (Naqvi et al 1987).

<sup>52</sup> Naqvi et al (1987), p 107. It might be inferred that the denial of “moral rights” probably hints at the prevalence of sexual violence and exploitation of *kammi* and labourer women by landlord and peasant men alike.

the conditions of labour generally. Sooner or later it will be necessary to provide the agricultural labour some measure of security and protection, but the problems involved in devising such measures are so intricate that it would need far more time than we had at our disposal.”<sup>53</sup>

The view that the “agricultural labourer” was just another wage worker was disingenuous or highly uninformed. It took a further decade and a half, and the revival of elected government, before even the basic recommendations of the Muslim League committee with respect to the non-cultivator *kammi* and labourer classes were addressed. The “Punjab Housing Facilities for Non-Proprietors in Rural Areas Act” of 1975, which is not generally included in the discussion of land reforms, was probably the most important land allotment programme in terms of the number of beneficiaries.<sup>54</sup> The scheme was specifically targeted at the non-cultivator and non-proprietor classes that the 1959 Land Reforms Commission had shrugged off.

So limited were the parameters of the land reform debate that even the dissenting voices – the so-called radicals – did not raise the issue of the labouring classes. The Pakistan land reforms did not question the social hierarchies that had been formalized under colonial rule. The legal and social division of rural society into “cultivators” and “non-cultivators”, or between “agricultural tribes” and “non-agricultural tribes” was not even brought under discussion. In fact, the Punjab land reform regulations continued to insist that allotments could be made only to “tenants” who do not own their land, or those “cultivators” who own very little land. This seemingly innocuous injunction effectively ruled out all those who had been classified under the British as “non-cultivators” from government land allotment.<sup>55</sup>

### **Ignored because Ignorant**

In Sindh too, the idyllic self-cultivating tenant model clouded any serious consideration of the effects of the colonial land arrangements. It is worth recalling that the Sindh *zamindar* was first hailed and anointed as the *ryot*, before being chastised for exploiting the real cultivators. In the rush to find “landowners”, the specific agronomy of the province – where irrigation management was a more valuable asset than land – was disregarded to the cost of generations of tillers. The development of canal irrigation in the intervening period had further bolstered the *zamindar-haari* system. The post-independence land reform debate in Sindh had such little effect on the conditions on the ground perhaps because it continued to remain oblivious of the actual conditions of land and irrigation in the province.

An easily ignored feature of Sindh agriculture is that it is almost entirely dependent on surface irrigation. Ground water is brackish over much of the province and rainfall is low and unreliable. This fact was easily ignored because it varies significantly from conditions found elsewhere in India. The implications of this exclusive dependence on surface irrigation are worth considering. There are very high economies of scale in the development and maintenance of cultivable land. It is virtually impossible for a cultivator to farm an individual plot of land in isolation

---

<sup>53</sup> Naqvi et al (1987), pp 215-216.

<sup>54</sup> Sayeed (1980) reported that 800,000 families benefited from this scheme – or nearly three times the number of allottees of ceiling-surplus land.

<sup>55</sup> The caste-based Punjab Alienation of Land Act of 1900 is yet to be repealed.

from his surroundings. Crop farming is either an integrated activity or not an economic pursuit at all – the independent peasant cultivator is but a figment of the imagination. Traditionally, the *zamindar* was quite often the person who mobilized resources for the maintenance of local surface irrigation systems. After the construction of modern canals and the introduction of a formal system of irrigation management, the *zamindar*, or the large-scale landholder, became a key player in ensuring that his particular command area received its due (or undue) share of water.

Any reform of agricultural land ownership in Sindh, therefore, had to pay attention to the reform of irrigation management in the first instance. The debate in the Sindh Government Hari Enquiry Committee – as captured by the main and the dissenting reports – did not consider the importance of irrigation management to any great extent. The main report obviated the need for a reform of irrigation management by recommending the regulation and not the dismantling of the *zamindar-haari* system of ownership and tenure.

The dissenting note of M. Masud, which acquired iconic status in subsequent commentary on the land reforms debates, was far more radical. Masud, a career bureaucrat from outside Sindh, was in favour of a peasant-cultivator model and demanded the outright expropriation of the *zamindar*. His plea was emotional and laced with moral overtones and communal and ethnic prejudice, but short on details about Sindh's agronomy, or practical ideas about how the state might step in to take over many of the economic functions of the *zamindar*. He derided as self-serving the submissions of Dailmal Daulatram before an earlier inquiry committee that Sindh's agronomy was peculiar, that the *zamindar* was not merely an absentee rentier, and that dismantling the *zamindar-haari* system might disturb the rural economy.<sup>56</sup>

Later attempts at allotting ceiling-surplus land and other state-owned land to landless *haaris* confirmed the critical role of irrigation management in ensuring the sustainability of any land transfers. Tenancy regulation, however, particularly political initiatives in favour of the *haaris* in the 1970s, did have a positive impact on the bargaining position of the latter for some time. For all his conservatism, Daulatram's assessment of the role of the *zamindar* was proven to be more prescient than Masud's. Serious attempts at land reform and the dismantling of the *zamindar-haari* system in Sindh required credible reforms of irrigation management. In the absence of these, the land reform debate was no more than a stage for high-sounding rhetoric and noble intentions.

### **Revisiting the Three Estates**

Land reforms in Pakistan amounted to no more than relatively mild agrarian reforms pegged to an unrealizable vision of self-cultivating peasant communities. The institutions of property rights in land remained mostly unchanged. Many of the victims of the several rounds of dispossession – among them, the *jaanglees* of western Punjab *doabs*, the non-cultivating castes and tribes, and the Sindh *haaris* – remained unacknowledged and uncompensated. The village-based revenue system and its rigid

---

<sup>56</sup> Naqvi et al (1987), p 9 and p 79. Moreover, Masud did not do any favours to his case by awkwardly stepping into the debate on evacuee property and demanding the mass settlement of refugees from India in rural Sindh on land expropriated from Sindhi *zamindars* (Naqvi et al, 1987, p 87).

formalisation of caste hierarchies were not brought under discussion, let alone challenged. For many of the dispossessed, the first winds of freedom came not through land reforms but the enfranchisement associated with mass politics in the 1970s. It was then, finally, that the *jaanglees*, the *kammis*, the *haaris* and many others found a voice and engaged in active bargaining and received political and legal support in local class struggles with their erstwhile patrons.

The political context was important even in the use that various communities made of existing laws and regulations, such as the abolition of “superior” claims, and the regulation of tenancy contracts. The tenant-farmer movement for land ownership which peaked in the 1970s in the Hashtnagar region of the NWFP is perhaps the most conspicuous and well-documented case. There were mobilizations too against some of the “superior” claimants – such as the *nawab* of Dir.<sup>57</sup> Across Sindh there were reports of *haaris* ceasing to pay extra demands of *zamindars* and revenue officials alike. One seemingly minor but politically significant change in tenancy regulation was the shifting of some of the input shares from the *haari* to the *zamindar*.<sup>58</sup>

While the agrarian reforms agenda was mostly limited to the second and third estates – namely, the settled areas of Punjab and Sindh respectively – the wider contest around land remained mostly localised and undocumented. The homestead land schemes initiated in the 1970s encouraged many of the dispossessed to organize collective action around their legal entitlements. This process extended beyond rural areas to irregular urban settlements, which too were given legal protection at around the same time. Community-level studies indicate that local class conflicts are quite often about usufruct rights in common property resources. In Punjab villages where *shaamilat* were attached to the village estate, the unreformed concept of “village proprietors” has continued to cause friction and contest over rival claims of ownership rights to uncultivated land.<sup>59</sup>

The issue of common property resources came into play not only in the settled areas, but also in the expansive first estate of Balochistan and the other “non-settled” tribal territories. Bhutto’s government abolished *sardari* (tribal chief’s) tithes on harvest in Balochistan amid populist slogans in the 1970s. This was widely interpreted as a self-serving move to harass the opposition which was led by tribal chiefs.<sup>60</sup> In fact the more fierce struggle in the province was about fundamental issues in the control and ownership of all land and natural resources, including the valuable reserves of natural gas. Tribal leaders derived their legitimacy by representing collective tribal interests of joint ownership over “uncultivated” land and its resources – traditionally water, forest produce and rangeland, but latterly also mineral extraction.

These latter struggles highlighted the pitiful limitations of the land reforms debates of the earlier period. The political tussle of that time could at best be characterised as an argument between two segments of the elite: reform-minded military-bureaucratic

---

<sup>57</sup> Gazdar (2006).

<sup>58</sup> At an ActionAid organized conference on land reforms in 2007, *haari* activists from Sindh recalled that changing input shares in the 1970s was the most significant and empowering moment in their movement – even though there had been a reversion to the old input shares since then (Gazdar (2007b)).

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, case studies in Gazdar (2002), and Gazdar (2006).

<sup>60</sup> Herring (1979).

oligarchy and a politically-influential landed gentry. In fact, the differences between these groups were not very wide. Crucially, they both endorsed the basic architecture of colonial institutions of property rights in land. This was inevitable, of course, given that the propertied classes and the military-bureaucratic elite were both products of those very institutions.

At a cognitive level, the framework that was available to the bureaucrats – trained as they were in the mould of colonial revenue officers – was tied to revenue administration. The categories that made sense to them were those that already existed in the village revenue records or the *patwar* and *mukhtiarkar* manuals left behind by the British. The idyllic self-cultivating peasant model helped too in putting on the blinkers. What land meant to people – a place to live in security, raise animals, access forest resources, assert community identities, regulate rights of passage, create neutral spaces for cross-community and cosmopolitan exchange, and extract mineral wealth – had many more dimensions than could be admitted in the land revenue record.

Blind faith in the institutions that already existed becomes apparent also in the optimism of the reformers about the capacity of the state machinery to achieve even the limited goals that were set. Subsequent failures were correctly put down to manipulation of the land records and the administrative machinery on the part of vested interests. If a land reform law could turn a person listed as a tenant-cultivator in the  *khasra girdavri* (village revenue record) into an owner-cultivator, one solution was to change the  *khasra girdavri* itself. It was a man-made document after all, and not a revealed text.<sup>61</sup> The notion that the state machinery functioned in a politically-neutral manner to ensure the enforcement of property rights, just as they might have been written, was touchingly naïve if not worse. As later events were to show, some of the significant changes in favour of the dispossessed were possible only through a combination of law and political mobilization – and sometimes only through political mobilization.

Cognition may not have been the only factor in limiting the scope and political depth of the reform agenda. It was true, of course, that the landed gentry was in no hurry to give up its power. In the meanwhile, the military-bureaucratic elite too had become a major stakeholder in land. Land allotment policies explicitly favoured civil and military personnel, particularly the latter.<sup>62</sup> This was in part a continuation of the Punjab canal colony expansion of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The state elite also emerged as a key beneficiary in the allotment of land for non-agricultural purposes, something that was to become increasingly conspicuous over time.

While it was convenient to shift the blame for conservatism onto the propertied leadership of the Muslim League, the military-bureaucratic elite was itself a prime beneficiary of keeping things as they were. The early tension over the disposal of “evacuee” property was interpreted as a rivalry between interests represented by the bureaucracy and the political class respectively.<sup>63</sup> The higher echelons of the

---

<sup>61</sup> Aware of this, the framers of the 1972 reforms called for a suspension of all changes of record in the period five years prior to the law, pending review (Herring, 1979).

<sup>62</sup> Waseem (2002)

<sup>63</sup> Maniruzzman (1966).

bureaucracy were, after all, disproportionately populated by Muslim officers from India who had opted for Pakistan. Throughout the 1950s, landed politicians had been blamed for political instability, stalling land reforms, and denying rights to the migrants. It was no coincidence that the 1958 Martial Law claimed to deal with all three problems in one fell swoop. In fact, any differences between the “landed gentry” and the state elite were minor compared to the underlying contest between both these offspring of imperial power and a wide range of the dispossessed.

## 4. Back to Land and Resistance

So, who owns the country anyway? The 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial officials asked this question for the lands that were brought under their control, and established a concept of ownership that was linked with tax liabilities. Technically, it was a revenue settlement and it identified owners, or more precisely, conferred ownership rights, as it went along. It is not surprising that electoral franchise was limited to the owners of the country.<sup>64</sup> Conversely, it is also unsurprising that the expansion of the right to vote, or the steady increments in the formal constituents of the polity, were associated with challenges to the existing hierarchy of ownership rights.

The agrarian reform agenda was a limited attempt at reforming the more archaic features of the old order and it fulfilled some of its objectives. To the small extent that agrarian class conflict was perceived as a threat, the agrarian reforms helped to preempt and face down that threat. Landless tenants belonging to cultivator castes were accommodated to a degree – economic status was brought in line with social position, particularly in regions where political mobilization was under way.<sup>65</sup> Some of the major changes, however, were occurring on the non-agrarian side. The struggle for the homestead and questions about the ownership of uncultivated land became active points of contestation.

Economic diversification – with a relative decline in the contribution of crop farming, but not livestock rearing – has not led to any decline in the political salience of land and land ownership. If anything, the effect has been in the opposite direction. The politics of land was managed effectively while it remained confined within an agrarian reform agenda. The question “who owns the country” could be answered then with reference to the revenue records, and controlled changes could be wrought into that record while keeping the order intact. The world outside the revenue records is more unruly. The dispossessed that were present in the District Gazetteers as *jaanglees*, menials, and vagrants, but absent from revenue records are now citizens with voices. So are the tribes of the first estate where the settlement was virtually non-existent. And when the “who owns the country” question is asked today – not by revenue officials but by investors, road-builders, oil companies, banks, megastores, golf-courses, speculators and global finance capital – the answer is a cacophony of competing voices.

### The Contest is Land

While the residual agrarian class struggles have subsided, land and the resources that go with it have become the most important issues of political contention. Whether it is constitutional crises triggered by perpetually disturbed civil-military relations, federal-provincial conflicts such as the insurgency in Balochistan, urban violence in Karachi, or even the Taliban threat in the northwest of the country – questions concerning the ownership, use and rights to land are never far below the surface. The

---

<sup>64</sup> In the 1946 elections for the Central Legislative Assembly, (which would inherit India from the British,) franchise was restricted to property owners who paid land revenue, urban property taxes or income tax (Parsons, 1946).

<sup>65</sup> For the 1946 franchise in Punjab, the definition of property owner included those tenants who had been recognized as enjoying occupancy rights under the 1887 Punjab Tenancy Act (Parsons, 1946).

deferral of deep-seated institutional reforms in land administration, or even laying out and agreeing broad principles for apportioning stakes in land is proving costlier still, as the “market” becomes globalized through the major entry of finance capital and foreign investment.

### *Civil-Military Relations*<sup>66</sup>

The latest chapter in the troubled history of civil-military relations in Pakistan – with long periods of direct military rule interspersed with civilian government to relieve simmering resentment – has brought into focus the economic aspects of the military’s political hegemony. There is a growing understanding that the military has built up institutional stakes in the economy that go well beyond the defence budget. The most conspicuous aspect of “encroachment” into the civil economy is the privileged access to agricultural, commercial and residential land enjoyed by military organizations and personnel.

According to the defence analyst Ayesha Siddiqi (2007), the military controls around a tenth of all government land in Pakistan. Military officers are awarded agricultural lands as a normal part of career incentives, and the total land allotted to this group since 1947 amounts to around 2.3 million acres - equivalent to the total area of land allotted to beneficiaries of land reforms. In line with historical precedence, a major portion of land brought into cultivation due to the development of irrigation infrastructure was specifically ear-marked for military officers. Siddiqi (2007) claims that the military and its personnel have emerged as the largest “land barons” in the country.

There are three main ways in which the military and its personnel have gained access to valuable land for non-security purposes. The first is the continuity of the canal colony policies of awarding large areas of irrigated state land to military officers. The main land awards up to the 1970s were in Sindh, where large-scale irrigation projects opened up new tracts of irrigated area. At least a tenth of the new land was earmarked for allotment to military officers. Later, as local opposition to these allotments grew in Sindh, and as the supply of “barrage” land was exhausted, the focus shifted to southern Punjab where the expansion of the canal network brought further area under cultivation. It has been reported that much of the political impetus behind further irrigation development – in the face of opposition from downstream water-users and environmentalists alike – is coming from the military as the availability of land in existing canal districts runs out. It needs to be added that military officers are privileged but not alone in benefiting from the allotment of state land; civil officers too have been recipients of generous awards.

The second important source of land acquisition by the military is also a continuation of colonial policy. There are military cantonments around the country – ostensibly for the purposes of national defence – which have become important sources of economic opportunity for the military and its personnel. Cantonments usually take up large areas where apart from military bases, a wide range of “normal” civil activities take place. These include extensive social infrastructure for military personnel and their families, agricultural land, as well as commercial development. Formally, land

---

<sup>66</sup> The following section draws heavily upon the insights provided by Siddiqi (2007).

for cantonments is acquired by the defence ministry for the specific purposes of national security from the relevant land authority. Most of the cantonments are on lands leased by the defence ministry from provincial governments. In the case of new cantonments, land has also been acquired from private owners through legal instruments such as the Land Acquisition Act of 1894, available to provincial and federal governments.

Security-related reasons have been used to establish local monopolies over other civil economy activities. The case of the Okara military farms in Punjab and the fisherfolks' struggle for the cancellation of fishing leases in coastal Sindh are disparate yet comparable.

In Okara, the military leased large tracts of land in the early part of the previous century from the Punjab provincial government in order to establish dairy farms. These farms were meant to supply milk and dairy products to the army – hence their purpose could be justified as being of direct relevance to defence activities. The tenants of these farms are civilian farmers who have customarily paid a harvest share to their army landlords. In 2002, an attempt was made by the army farm managers to change the terms of the contract from share-tenancy to fixed leases of specific time periods. This was interpreted by the tenants as a way of reducing their tenurial security, and they resisted.<sup>67</sup> The military managers used coercive means to force the tenants to agree new contractual terms, but the resistance continued until the issue became a major source of embarrassment for the military authorities.<sup>68</sup> The suspicions of the tenants remain unanswered.

Coastal lakes and marshes in southern Sindh sustain large communities of fisherfolk. The region was “militarized” due to its proximity to the Indian border, and the Coast Guards – a military force – established a monopoly over fishing rights in the area of its domain. Coast Guards would award fishing licenses to particular contractors who would then allow fishing to take place in return for a fee. There were complaints of extortionate practices, and claims on the part of the traditional fishing communities that they enjoyed historically exclusive rights of fishing in these lakes and swamps. The two cases are similar in the sense that the military organizations used security-related rationale to create stake for themselves in otherwise non-security related activities. In the former case, the original rationale was connected to military supplies, and in the latter it was to do with the proximity of the border. The case for military involvement was unconvincing in either case.

The third, and possibly the most conspicuous entry of the military into the land economy is the mushrooming of “defence housing authorities” (DHAs) across prime urban areas of the country. The DHA purports to be a welfare organization for military officers who are allotted residential and commercial plots in new urban developments at highly subsidized rates. The officers generally sell the allotted plots at huge profits. Lands for DHAs have been acquired through a variety of means – many of them involving the use of the “public interest” clause of the Land Acquisition Act. In some cases, land was initially acquired for defense purposes by

---

<sup>67</sup> Shehzad (2003)

<sup>68</sup> Rizvi (2006); Adams (2004)

cantonments, and then subsequently turned over to a DHA.<sup>69</sup> In other cases the civilian machinery for land acquisition was deployed. In virtually all cases, however, there was a significant change of status in the use to which land was put over the course of being acquired.

The DHA innovation started in Karachi with the establishment of a Defence Housing Officer's Society in the 1950s. This was a relatively inconspicuous development at the time, as many other interest groups within or close to the state went about acquiring land for residential and commercial purposes.<sup>70</sup> In the 1980s, however, during the period of a military government, the Defence Housing Society was considerably expanded. This was also a time when the real estate market experienced a boom, as foreign exchange flows into Pakistan expanded as a result of the war in Afghanistan and Pakistan's role as a conduit of assistance.<sup>71</sup> In the latest round of military government, the Defence Housing Society was converted into Defence Housing Authorities, operating under the direct control of the local military commander, and similar DHAs were created in all the major urban centres of the country.

The DHAs have further partnered with foreign investors and property developers in new schemes and developments for purely commercial purposes. These developments are a far cry from the original "employee welfare" function associated with subsidized land allotments to serving and retired officers. Under periods of direct military rule, the DHAs enjoy a large measure of autonomy and immunity from existing environmental and compensatory laws. One particularly contentious scheme is the handover of two islands off Karachi to a Dubai-based property developer for building luxury housing complexes. The DHA asserts ownership, even though local fishing communities claim to be the historical inhabitants and owners of these barren islands. The fisherfolk were forcibly evicted to enable the Dubai-based developer to start its operations.<sup>72</sup>

The military's involvement in the land economy has a number of salient features and has led to several types of contest over land. The continuation of the "historical" policy of agricultural land allotment came to be resisted in Sindh – far more so than it had been in Punjab in the decades before – as awareness had increased about the value of land that had been developed through canal construction. The notion that this was state land, and that it was the state's prerogative as to how this land should be allotted became politically indefensible. The opposition to military land allotments was premised on the grounds that local tillers of the soil – the *haaris* – had the first right to any new land being developed. These claims of preemption were backed up by references to the notional – though not legal – collective ownership of the land on the part of the Sindhis. The opposition to military land acquisition, therefore, was generically similar to the political opposition to the allotment of state-controlled land to civil officers, or indeed to other "outsiders" such as refugees from India. It is

---

<sup>69</sup> Siddiq, 2007

<sup>70</sup> The same period saw the establishment of housing schemes for civilian officers in Karachi, which was the capital of Pakistan in the first decade after independence. One rationale for such allotments was that many of the state officials had migrated from India and there was a dearth of accommodation in the new capital.

<sup>71</sup> Siddiq (2007).

<sup>72</sup> Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum (2008)

natural, moreover, for military (and other “outsider” state beneficiaries) to dispose off their allotments to local stakeholders.

The issue of “group” rights of “indigenous” communities also became conspicuous in Baloch opposition to the acquisition of land for cantonments. A unique feature of the military’s land economy is the creation of an enclave where property rights arrangements can function in isolation from the economy and society outside. In some parts of the country, the military enclaves acquire the characteristic of ethnically distinct islands surrounded by “indigenous” communities – virtually like colonial outposts. The enclaves not only operate in institutional isolation from their surroundings – they also draw upon local natural and public resources in order to make themselves viable. The DHAs have extended the enclave idea further by converting themselves into safe havens for domestic and foreign investment – havens that keep the institutional, environmental and usufruct concerns of other claimants at bay through sheer force.

### *Balochistan and the First Estate*<sup>73</sup>

The civil conflict in Balochistan – Pakistan’s largest province in terms of land mass – was sparked off by a number of acts of violence committed in the name of Baloch nationalism. Some shadowy organizations claiming to represent the interests of the Baloch people – the largest ethnic group in Balochistan – claimed responsibility for terrorist attacks on foreign engineers, security forces, and various installations such as gas pipelines and railway lines. While the precise identity of various militant groups remains fiercely debated, the issues raised by them were widely echoed across the political spectrum in the Baloch population. Traditional leaders of the Baloch community – mostly tribal chiefs of central Balochistan – were quick to articulate the “Baloch cause”. Although couched in terms of national aspirations for self-governance, the main demands of Baloch nationalism are around the ownership and use of land and natural resources.<sup>74</sup>

The conflict in Balochistan has cost hundreds of lives, including those of some important political leaders of the Baloch. Vast areas of the province have been under military control and security operations have included the frequent use of air power against insurgents as well as civilians. Internal displacement reached tragic proportions with reports that some 80,000 people had moved from their homes in conditions of destitution and despair to other parts of the province or to other provinces. Hundreds of people have “disappeared” and are thought to be detained by state secret services.

Balochistan – particularly its Baloch dominated centre and south - is large in land mass and rich in natural resources but with a sparse population. Most of the province is arid or semi-arid with erratic and seasonal crop production. The traditional economy has centred around raising livestock, trade, and marine fishing along the long coastline. Part of Balochistan (mostly the ethnic Pashtun north) was governed directly by the British Indian empire, while the rest consisted of various local states and fiefdoms, the largest one being the Khanate of Kalat. In terms of local

---

<sup>73</sup> This sub-section draws upon Gazdar (2007a) and the references cited there.

<sup>74</sup> Gall (2006).

governance, however, both British Balochistan and the local states enjoyed a high degree of autonomy. Land settlements were incomplete and erratic and their results were widely disputed. The idea that “non-settled” land belonged residually to the state, however, persisted at the formal level.<sup>75</sup>

Into the heady mix of strong tribal and ethnic social organization and solidarity and incomplete institutional integration into the state, throw in rich natural resources. Large and varied reserves of mineral resources were discovered in Balochistan, particularly its centre and south (mostly Baloch dominated regions). Coal mines had been discovered a long time ago during the British era. The legal position on the ownership of mineral resources was similar to the rest of British India – all rights to royalty vested with the state. In practice, however, tribes claimed ownership of the land its resources. A way around was found by mineral departments of provincial governments in awarding coal-mining contracts to local parties only. In common parlance, the fee that local tribes and tribal chiefs charged from actual mine operators has come to be known as “royalty”. There was an implicit acknowledgment of the rights of local communities over resources even if the law favoured the state.<sup>76</sup>

The issue of “royalty” became more acute with the discovery of natural gas reserves. A little-noticed change in law had transferred the ownership of natural gas and oil from the provincial to central government. The constitution upheld this position. Balochistan was sitting on vast reserves of natural gas, and was not legally entitled to any proceeds from its exploitation. Moreover, local communities where the natural gas was found had no legal claims to this resource. Although the natural gas companies paid “royalties” in the form of subsidies, and service contracts to local tribal chiefs, the scale of economic advantage had tipped decisively in the favour of outsiders. Local “royalties” amounted to a small proportion of the surpluses earned from Balochistan’s natural gas. While the provincial government was impoverished and dependent on loans and handouts from the federal government even for its normal functions, Balochistan supplied over half of all natural gas consumed in the rest of Pakistan over the decades.

While the province remained relatively under-developed and starved of infrastructure, the last decade saw the launching of a number of high profile projects aimed at improving transport and communication network. The most conspicuous was the development of a deep-water port at the fishing town of Gwadar near the Iranian border and close to the mouth of the Gulf.<sup>77</sup> On closer examination, it turns out that most of the infrastructure development in Balochistan was related to the Gwadar port.<sup>78</sup> There was a concerted campaign to promote Gwadar as a destination for real estate investment.<sup>79</sup>

The land in and around Gwadar became a source of contention quickly. The revenue records were incomplete and contested, but were used by the government to acquire

---

<sup>75</sup> Gazdar (2007a).

<sup>76</sup> Gazdar (2007a).

<sup>77</sup> "Great Land Robbery" (2008).

<sup>78</sup> See Budhani and Mallah (2007).

<sup>79</sup> Foreign investment poured in from UAE, China, South Korea and Singapore. The investment was channeled towards developing the port, setting up industries, as well as investment in real estate. "Gwadar Project in Second Phase" (2005)

several thousand acres for various agencies. Other land around the town changed hands several times and estate agents across the country began to market plots in housing and industrial estates on the promise of high returns. A speculative bubble emerged between 2001 and 2006 to be deflated once a greater sense of realism was restored - aided in part by an escalation in the insurgency in Balochistan. The master-plan requires the eviction and resettlement of the entire population of the old town.<sup>80</sup>

There was intense political mobilisation in Balochistan around Gwadar on two separate counts. First, it was widely believed that land was being taken over by the state and by private investors at the expense of the local communities. Various news reports also reflected the general view that the major share of earnings from the Gwadar Port would not be repatriated to the provincial or local government, nor would they have a stake in running the Port Authority.<sup>81</sup> While the government was keen to promote visions of Gwadar turning into a Dubai, the Baloch population feared a repeat of the Karachi experience. The latter was, in the eyes of the local communities, a simple case of dispossession and marginalization. Second, the land records that existed worked in the favour of the traditional ruling castes and families of the region. The working castes and classes, such as the Medh fisherfolk and the Darzadas were unable to assert legal title to their historical rights of usufruct.

Gwadar became a potent symbol of ethnic and class-based dispossession in the face of strategic imperatives, migration, and finance investment. It united Baloch political opposition to the development agenda pursued by the Pakistani state which had undermined and bypassed provincial government and other local institutions.

#### *Pashtun Tribal Areas*<sup>82</sup>

Collective ownership rights play a key role in maintaining tribal solidarity in the first estate. In the Pashtun regions – northern Balochistan, the Federally Administered Tribal Areas (FATA) and the North-West Frontier Province (NWFP, also known as Pakhtunkhwa), the Pakistani state faces one of its most serious challenges. The prospects of a Taliban-Al Qaeda takeover of these regions is a widely perceived security threat to Pakistan, Afghanistan and the wider international community. The institutional context of the challenge has received less attention than its ideological and security dimensions.

The challenge and the counter-strategies posed by the Taliban Al-Qaeda (TAQ) rely on prevailing tribal structures and solidarities to pursue their political aims. The fact that the Pashtun tribal regions of the first estate had not been “settled” allowed room for movements of Islamic clerics to encroach upon traditional tribal domains of authority – such as arbitration and dispute resolution. In regions such as Swat where the old order was based on clan hierarchy rather than tribal solidarity, there was a great deal of contest in land claims within communities. Here too the clerics positioned themselves as arbitrators.<sup>83</sup>

---

<sup>80</sup> Fazl-e-Haider (2005)

<sup>81</sup> “Tax free Zones in Gwadar” (2005); Fazl-e-Haider (2007).

<sup>82</sup> This sub-section draws upon author’s ongoing joint work with Asad Sayeed and Khalid Aziz. For an analysis of FATA violence see Aziz (2007).

<sup>83</sup> Bengali (2009).

Islamic clerics, however, remain at a disadvantage vis-a-vis the traditional tribal leadership when it comes to the demarcation and safeguarding of a tribe's collective interests – especially its territorial claims and assertions. The fact that the tribes rather than the state are seen as legitimate repositories of collective rights over common property resources reinforces the weakness of state institutions. The relative decline in the value of rents from common property resources – due to diversification and militarisation of the economy – has probably contributed to a decline in the authority of traditional leaders who were challenged initially by the Islamic clerics and then by TAQ.

Any strategy to stem the tide of Taliban-Al Qaida led militancy cannot ignore the issue of land rights. In areas like Swat serious consideration will have to be given to thoroughgoing land reforms that remove contention and conflict within communities. In other places, like many of the FATA agencies, the TAQ threat will have to be met in the first instance by restoring the position of traditional tribal leaders. These leaders have a natural advantage over the clerics in promoting the group interests of tribes in the management of common property resources in the face of rival claims of neighbouring tribes. Any reforms that revalue and formally recognize the local management of common property resources, therefore, will elevate the authority of tribal leaders over religious clerics or TAQ militants.

### *Political Conflict in Karachi*

The largest urban metropolis of Pakistan has been wracked by political conflict since the mid-1980s. Although the intensity of the conflict and violence has abated since the late 1990s, the city remains politically divided between parties and groups that claim to represent various ethnic, sectarian and class interests. The emergence of ethnic politics in the city marked a shift from the past, and the political evolution of the city since then has been interpreted as one of the management and moderation of ethnic divisions.

The Urdu-speaking “Mohajirs” – or descendents of Muslim migrants and refugees from India – form the largest single ethnic group, comprising just under half of the total population. The remainder of the population is made up of the major Pakistani ethnic groups (Punjabis, Seraikis, Pashtuns, Sindhis, and Baloch) and other groups such as Gujaratis, Kachhis, and Bengalis who are exclusive to Karachi. The emergence of the MQM or the Mohajir Quami Movement (‘Mohajir national movement’) which later changed its name to the Muttahida Quami Movement (‘united national movement’) was a major turning point. The party soon acquired a reputation for militancy and violence, and faced several rounds of state persecution. There were militant and armed factions also among other ethnic groups that pursued violent politics to varying degrees.

Since the late 1990s the MQM as well as other groups have reverted to electoral politics to pursue their aims. While maintaining armed wings, these parties have participated in local, provincial and national elections – on nominally non-ethnic programmes. They have tried to reach out across ethnic boundaries to attract members and supporters in “other” communities. The MQM has controlled the city

government since 2005, and was an important member of the ruling coalition in Sindh and in the national government between 2002 and 2007. In the national and provincial elections in 2008, the MQM secured three-fifths of the popular vote, but 85 per cent of the seats from Karachi. Its major contender was the Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP), and surprisingly, the Pashtun-based Awami National Party (ANP) which managed to win two seats in the Sindh provincial assembly.

The relative peace in Karachi, interspersed with violent clashes between political rivals and other groups, conceals an emerging geographical and class cleavage in the city. While the MQM retains its electoral dominance, it is clear that the political geography of Karachi has become divided between the centre and the periphery, with some exceptions in both zones that tend to prove the rule. The geographical centre of the city consists of mostly formal settlements and housing and commercial areas with secure property rights of long-standing. These areas form the core of support for the MQM – quite largely because they are home to its original ethnic base (Urdu-speaking migrants from India).

The periphery consists of expanses of *katchi abadis* (irregular settlements) and *goths* (historical villages), which too have acquired the characteristics of urban irregular settlements. The periphery is ethnically more diverse than the centre, and dominated numerically by working classes compared with middle class preponderance in the centre. The main exception in the centre-periphery classification is the “old” areas of the city to its south. These are settled and regular, but with some characteristics of the periphery – there is greater ethnic and class heterogeneity.

The centre-periphery divide has been manifest in electoral politics. While the centre remains a stronghold of the MQM, the periphery has seen a consolidation around the main rival party, the PPP. In the recent elections the PPP and ANP arrived at an understanding to jointly face the MQM. The geographical divide has also been evident in incidents of political violence over the last few years, leading up to the recent elections. Clashes between rival groups across the city claimed the lives of over fifty persons in May 2007, when the government and opposition parties collided over welcoming the deposed Chief Justice Iftikhar Mohammad Chaudhry to the city. Human rights organizations that documented the violence found a clear geographical pattern – with the central parts of the city under firm MQM control, and the periphery in the hands of its opponents.<sup>84</sup>

Rival claims to land have played a key role in the evolution of the centre-periphery divide. The peripheral areas have diverse levels of tenurial security – they are mostly made up of irregular settlements at different stages of development and regularization. Pashtun and working class Punjabis and Seraikis are present in large numbers in the irregular settlements. There are also numerous Sindhi and Baloch historical villages whose inhabitants claim to be the “original” owners of much of the land in the periphery. Although the “original” inhabitants of the historical villages are few in number, these villages grew in population as newcomers from Sindhi and Baloch communities came to settle here.

---

<sup>84</sup> Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2007).

The MQM's period in government happened to coincide with two fortuitous developments: the extraordinary rise in real estate values due to inbound investment, and the availability of resources for public investment in infrastructure such as roads and expressways. Both these developments were triggered by the large inflows of foreign exchange into Pakistan after 9/11 – as foreign aid flows increased, and Pakistan was considered a safer home with “Muslim” capital held abroad coming under closer surveillance. The land hunger, combined with MQM's reputation for strong-arm tactics alarmed the communities living on the periphery, particularly the Pashtuns, Baloch and Sindhis, that they faced eviction at the hands of property developers. These fears were stoked by several high profile urban development projects (notably the Lyari Expressway) where large-scale forced evictions did take place with the support of the MQM.

The Lyari Expressway (LEW) project – which is an elevated highway running over the old Lyari riverbed – connects the Karachi port with inter-city roads. The problem was that the riverbank was home to hundreds of thousands of families. While some claimed historic rights of ownership, most were migrants or descendents of migrants who had settled illegally on encroached public land. These settlements had acquired a degree of permanence, in line with numerous other *katchi abadis* in Karachi. The process of eviction went through several stops and starts – with the authorities finally agreeing to allot land to the affectees as compensation. The new housing schemes set up ostensibly to house the affectees of LEW were used as an opening on the part of the city authorities to bring further land into residential use and to target that to middle class investors. The effect was to further alienate residents of *katchi abadis* and *goths* in the periphery, as they would be evicted to make room for new housing schemes.

The periphery's fear of dispossession extended beyond the city limits to neighbouring coastal districts of Thatta and Lasbela (in Balochistan). The perceived nexus between foreign investors (mostly from West Asia, and often including Pakistanis resident in those countries), local political bosses and the military was seen to be operating everywhere. Property development schemes requiring the relocation of several coastal villages in Karachi and its surroundings were widely advertised – this was the first time that the potential affectees ever got to hear of the schemes. In Lasbela the Pakistan Air Force was involved in a bid to acquire a large chunk of the coastline – including a national park – for a firing range.

There were protests led by opposition political activists across the periphery – particularly among ethnic Sindhi, Baloch and Pashtun communities. For the “indigenous” ethnic Sindhis and Baloch, the fear of dispossession tapped into a longer collective memory of having been marginalized through the development of Karachi in the first instance. For ethnic Pashtuns, these protests were a statement that they too now enjoyed some collective rights in Karachi that needed to be acknowledged. These mobilizations and similar ones in working class irregular settlements within the city allowed the opposition parties to regain the initiative across Karachi, and to mount a sustained challenge to the MQM. It is interesting to note that the MQM itself traces its lineage to the efforts of poorer segments of the Mohajir community to secure tenurial security in *katchi abadis* in what was then the city's periphery.

## Politics of Rent

### *Market Illusion*

Land is arguably the most important economic resource after labour, and a natural target for reform in the interests of economic performance. A contemporary expression of this idea is the promotion of well-functioning land markets. It is argued that a land market with secure, anonymous and low-cost transactions is the key to economic efficiency and poverty reduction. Land, after all, is an economic entity like all others, and it ought to be transacted like other goods and services in a clear and flexible manner. The market idea resolves, at a stroke, the problem of agrarian structure, homesteads, uncultivated land, collective ownership of common property, access to mineral resources, and expected value of future investments. If property rights in land could be clearly specified, and costs of transactions lowered, land could be put to its most optimal use, constrained only by public interest reflected in government policy. Only if.

As this essay has tried to show, the history of institutional reforms in land is only partially an account of defining, specifying and securing property rights. It is quite largely a story of altering entitlements, empowering some individuals and groups, marginalizing others, and only sometimes changing the distribution in favour of the historically marginalized. It is also quite substantially a story of mobilization and resistance, through which claims have been held, rights and privileges won, and property rights asserted, defended, and acquired in order to effect nominal market transactions. The arrangements for holding land are deeply embedded in the social, political and institutional fabric of the country. The idea that all this can change simply through the computerisation of land records, and the elimination of red-tape from the land bureaucracy is as fanciful as the peasant-cultivator vision that drove the agrarian reforms agenda of the 1950s.

Take away the “unsettled” expanses of the first estate, or the “uncultivated” areas of Sindh and Punjab, ignore the explicitly discriminatory laws and land allotment rules relating to “cultivator castes”, set aside the problem of contract enforcement in situations where social power dominates formal state power, and try to forget the history of dispossession and resistance through which rights to land have been negotiated and re-negotiated - you still have to deal with instruments such as *benami* that are routinely used to deny substantive property rights to women.<sup>85</sup> It is remarkable that Pakistani courts allow the diminution of legal title in the face of patriarchal stubbornness. If there is an abiding lesson from Pakistan’s experience, it is that land reform makes sense as an integral part of a broader agenda of social reform, rather than its substitute or appendage.

The enclave economies of the cantonments or the DHAs – as well as other similar enclaves – create market-like conditions in small institutional islands which are surrounded by a sea of competing claims. In fact, the institutional islands themselves represent group claims that are enforced through arbitrary and dubious measures. On its own, the entry of global finance capital reinforces rather than subverts these essential features of land arrangements.

---

<sup>85</sup> SDPI (2008)

### *Rents are Political*

The contest over land is not only pervasive, it is also entirely political. Whether it is long-standing struggles against dispossession, disputed claims of ownership, assertion of group identities, or disagreements about changes in land use, the issue at stake is rent. Who are the rightful beneficiaries of canal development? The “indigenous” *jaanglees*, or migrant settlers and military officers? Should the conversion of land use from farmland to golf courses benefit the agrarian owners or some combine of foreign financiers and military officials? Who should be the main claimant of “royalties” or surpluses of oil or natural gas, once the costs of prospecting and production have been taken into account? The federal government, the provincial government, tribes, local individuals, urban consumers, or shareholders in oil and gas companies? Who are the “real” owners of Karachi and its surroundings? Which level of government? Existing residents, original “indigenous” communities, migrants and potential migrants, or property developers?

All of these options are equally good or bad from an efficiency point of view, because they relate to rents on an existing resource. Even the law, as it has been interpreted in Pakistan, does not provide a reliable or consistent answer. The Land Acquisition Act of 1894 states quite clearly, for example, that when determining the appropriate compensation for any land forcibly acquired by the state for public purposes, no consideration will be given to any expected change in the market value of the property due to change of use.<sup>86</sup> Subsequent legal argument widened the scope so much so that it is now required that the compensation should take into account any enhancement of value due to a proposed change of use.<sup>87</sup> In fact, it can be surmised that land acquired for *bona fide* public purposes – such as road construction – tends to be overcompensated while that acquired for private purposes through dubious applications of the law tends to be under-compensated.<sup>88</sup>

### *Emerging Principles for Reform*

Where exactly the distribution falls, therefore, depends on the balance of political power, though it can be guided by normative principles and prudential experiences from history. There are two clear candidates for the appropriation of rents from land development, change of use, and the exploitation of mineral and common property resources. The first is public good, exercised through federal, provincial and local levels of government. The second and overlapping candidate consists of marginalized and historically dispossessed groups and individuals. The latter principle of putting last first may also guide the definition of public good. These two principles taken together are self-avowedly normative ones, and need not be defended any further. A third principle emerges from the experience of reform and dispossession. It is about the political sustainability of any arrangement or award that does not properly

---

<sup>86</sup> Section 23, Land Acquisition Act 1894, cited in Farani (2005).

<sup>87</sup> Farani (2005), p 203.

<sup>88</sup> There are well-known cases of landowner using political influence to divert the routes of major road projects so that their lands are acquired under over-generous compensation packages. By contrast, there are cases such as that of a car manufacturer for whom the government forcibly acquired land using the land acquisition law at minimal rates of compensation, only for the land to be turned over into a luxury golf course, thus multiplying its value several-fold (Sherani, 2006).

acknowledge collective stakes of groups and communities over land and resources – even where this land might be privately owned in nominal terms.

## Conclusion

This essay has argued that the conventional “agrarian reform” framework provides too restrictive a view of land and reform in Pakistan. It opens only a small window, and that too in part of the country, for understanding issues in the access, use and ownership of land. Even if this perspective was useful once, it has lost its relevance due to a process of economic change. This does not mean that the reform of land ownership and use, or institutional change in land administration is no longer needed. On the contrary, land reform is an urgent requirement for conflict management, state-building, and transforming state and society in Pakistan.

The longer view advocated in this essay, and attention to geography – physical and political – have been useful in setting any current or future debate on land in a context. The institutional history of the state’s engagement with land reveals not only the specificity, but also the contingency of land systems in different regions of Pakistan. The boundaries of the three estates are only partly marked by physical geography. Political, military, cognitive and even incidental factors influenced the evolution of land ownership and control across the country. The Punjab-Sindh border that marked the boundary between *mahalwari* and *ryotwari* land systems straddled identical physical geographies and social organization. The happenstance of Punjab and Sindh belonging, respectively, to the Bengal and Bombay Presidencies was the critical factor that led to a village-based land system in one region and a landlord-based one in another. The settlements were also influenced by an understanding of existing agrarian structures and agronomic conditions, which in turn were highly contingent on the cognitive predispositions of early colonial officers.

The mechanics of state-building initiated by British colonial rule led to the recognition and empowerment of some groups at the expense of others. These processes of politically negotiated institutional and distributional change continued throughout colonial rule and after it. Violent upheavals and localized conflicts were not aberrations but rather part and parcel of these processes of political articulation and marginalization. There were marginalized groups in the form of *jaanglees*, *kammis*, dispossessed castes, *haaris*, tribes, “indigenous” people, or religious minorities at every juncture – often losing resources and at times regaining some lost ground. The land-owning classes and the state elite which appeared at the time to be at loggerheads with one another were actually offspring of the same basic political economy arrangement – one in which the real “outsiders” were neither small peasants or tenant-farmers.

The conventional agrarian reform agenda addressed some of these issues, and that too for a relatively brief period of time. The work of real institutional reform of land remains ahead of us. The reliable guides for finding the rightful stakeholders will not be found either in the agrarian economy or in the market, but in the framework of equal citizenship. Just as the old agrarian reform debate was overly influenced by the idyllic picture of a self-cultivating peasant economy, there is a tendency today to regard markets as somehow separate from their social and historical contexts. Market principles too, without additional normative considerations, will lead to a further entrenchment of the enfranchised, without any guarantee that the marginalized will be pacified. In other words, any approach to the land question that pretends to be

apolitical is unlikely to lead to stability and predictability in economic transactions. The contest over land is intense, and it will further intensify in different forms including urban violence, political-party political and ethnic conflict, conflict between civil society and the military, inter-provincial tension, and even armed insurgency.

The land reform agenda, ultimately, is not so much about agricultural productivity or economic efficiency, as it is about social change. From the social policy viewpoint it is obvious what the direction of change ought to be. The barriers to effective equal citizenship in Pakistan correspond very closely with the hierarchy of existing claims and rights to land. Gender, class, caste, kinship, religion, migration status, and ethnicity, are all factors that influence control over the uses of land and income flows from land in Pakistan.

## References

- Adams, Brad. (2004), "Pakistan: Military Torturing Farmers in Punjab," Human Rights Watch July 20, 2004  
[URL :http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2004/07/20/pakistan-military-torturing-farmers-punjab?print](http://www.hrw.org/en/news/2004/07/20/pakistan-military-torturing-farmers-punjab?print), Retrieved on February 13, 2009
- Agricultural Census Organization. (2003), "Agricultural Census 2000: Pakistan Report", Government of Pakistan Statistics Division. URL: [http://www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/aco/publications/agricultural\\_census2000/agricultural\\_census2000.pdf](http://www.statpak.gov.pk/depts/aco/publications/agricultural_census2000/agricultural_census2000.pdf)
- Ali, Imran (1989), The Punjab under Imperialism, 1885-1947 (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).
- Asian Human Rights Commission (2008), Appeal letter "PAKISTAN: Military officers dislocate centuries-old fishing communities",  
URL: <http://www.ahrchk.net/ua/mainfile.php/2008/2914/>
- Aziz, Khalid (2007), "Causes of Rebellion in Waziristan", mimeo, Regional Institute of Policy Research and Training, Peshawar.  
[www.khalidaziz.com/REBELLION\\_IN\\_WAZIRISTAN.doc](http://www.khalidaziz.com/REBELLION_IN_WAZIRISTAN.doc)
- Baden-Powell, B.H. (1892), The Land Systems of British India, Volumes 1 - 3, 1990 reprint (Delhi: Low Price Publications).
- Bengali, Kaiser. "Understanding Swat", *Dawn*, 1<sup>st</sup> March 2009.
- Budhani, Azmat A., Haris Gazdar, Hussain B. Mallah, and Noorulain Masood. (2006), "Social Marginalization and Education in Pakistan - Findings of a Qualitative Survey", Raw Data. (Karachi: Collective for Social Science Research).
- Budhani, Azmat Ali and Hussain Bux Mallah (2007), "Mega Projects in Balochistan", Paper presented at the National Conference on People's Perspectives on Mega Development in Pakistan organized by Participatory Development Initiatives and Actionaid International Pakistan, March 2007.  
[http://www.researchcollective.org/Documents/Mega\\_Projects\\_in\\_Balochistan.pdf](http://www.researchcollective.org/Documents/Mega_Projects_in_Balochistan.pdf)
- Cheesman, David (1997), Landlord Power and Rural Indebtedness in Colonial Sind: 1865-1901 (London: Curzon).
- Cotula, Lorenzo; Camilla Toulmin and Julian Quan. (2006). "Policies and Practices For Securing and Improving Access to Land", International Conference on Agrarian Reform and Rural Development (ICARRD), Issue Paper No.1. (International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED) website.)  
URL: [www.icarrd.org/en/icard\\_doc\\_down/Issue\\_Paper1.pdf](http://www.icarrd.org/en/icard_doc_down/Issue_Paper1.pdf)
- "Ejected Tenants March on Lahore", *Dawn*, Karachi, July 4 1956.
- Esposito, Bruce J. (1974), "The Politics of Agrarian Reform in Pakistan" *Asian Survey*, Vol. 14, No. 5, pp. 429-438. JSTOR.
- Farani, M (2005), Manual of Land Acquisition Laws, revised edition (Lahore: Lahore Law Times Publications).
- Fazl-e-Haider, Syed. "Speculative Real Estate Trading in Gwadar Port City", *Dawn*, 21<sup>st</sup> March 2005.
- Fazl-e-Haider, Syed. "Real Estate boom in Gwadar", *Dawn*, 9<sup>th</sup> April 2007.
- Federal Bureau of Statistics, (2006). Labour Force Survey 2005-2006. (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan Statistics Division.)

- Fiaz, Shahid. (2003), "Peace Audit Report 3: The Peace Question in Balochistan", South Asia Forum for Human Rights, SAFHR Paper 16
- Gall, Carlotta. "In Remote Pakistan Province, a Civil War Festers," *The New York Times*, April 2, 2006
- Gardezi, Hassan N. (1970), "Neo-Colonial Alliances and the Crisis of Pakistan", Pakistan Forum, Vol. 1, No. 2, pp. 3-6. JSTOR.
- Gazdar, Haris (2002), "Qualitative Survey of Poverty in Rural Pakistan", Background Paper. (Karachi: Collective for Social Science Research,)
- Gazdar, Haris; Ayesha Khan and Thermise Khan. (2002), "Land Tenure, Rural Livelihoods and Institutional Innovation". Publisher.
- Gazdar, Haris and Julian Quan. (2004), "Access to Land and Poverty Reduction in South Asia", A Study for the Rural Support Programmes Network, Pakistan Vol.1 Regional Overview. DFID/RSPN/NRI
- Gazdar, Haris (2006), "Thematic Paper: Rural Economy and Livelihoods", Asian Development Bank, Islamabad.  
URL:<http://www.adb.org/Documents/Reports/Consultant/37711-PAK/RuralEconomy.pdf>
- Gazdar, Haris (2007a), "Background Paper on Social Structures and Migration in Balochistan", Balochistan Economic Report, Asian Development Bank, Islamabad,.
- Gazdar, Haris. (2007b). Attendance notes, Conference on Land Reforms, Held at YMCA, Karachi, September 2007.
- Government of Pakistan (1951), Census of Pakistan 1951 Vol 1, Manager of Publications, Government of Pakistan, Karachi
- "The Great Land Robbery", *Herald*, June 2008.
- "Gwadar Project in Second Phase", *Dawn*, 27<sup>th</sup> June 2005
- Herald (2008), "The Great Land Robbery", cover story, Herald June 2008, Karachi
- Herring, Ronald J. (1979), "Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and the 'Eradication of Feudalism' in Pakistan", Comparative Studies in Society and History, Vol. 21, No. 4, pp. 519-557
- Human Rights Commission of Pakistan (2007), "Carnage in Karachi: A City Under Siege, 12 May 2007", Human Rights Commission of Pakistan, Lahore.
- Ibbetson, Denzil (1883), Panjab Castes, 1986 reprint (Lahore: Government Printing Press Punjab).
- Jalal, Ayesha (1990), The State of Martial Rule: The Origins of Pakistan's Political Economy of Defence, (Cambridge UK: Cambridge University Press).
- Khan, Mahmood H. Under-Development and Agrarian Structure in Pakistan. Boulder: Westview P, 1981.
- Lieftinck, Pieter, A. Robert Sadgove and Thomas C. Creyke (1968), Water and Power Resources of West Pakistan, Vol 1 (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins Press).
- Maniruzzaman, Talukder (1966), "Group Interests in Pakistan Politics", Pacific Affairs, 39:1/2, pp 83-98.
- Martin, Lee R. ( 1956), "Report on the Land Tenure Situation in Pakistan and India". Journal of Farm Economics, Vol. 38, No. 2, pp. 438-447. JSTOR
- Ministry of Finance, (2006). Pakistan Economic Survey. (Islamabad: Government of Pakistan Statistics Division.)
- Naqvi, Syed Nawab Haider, Mahmood Hasan Khan and M Ghaffar Chaudhry (1987), Land Reforms in Pakistan: A Historical Perspective (Islamabad: Pakistan Institute of Development Economics).

- Nazir, Pervaiz. (1981), "Transformation of Property Relations in the Punjab" Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 16, No. 8, pp. 281-285. JSTOR.
- Pakistan Fisherfolk Forum. (2008), "Fishermen, DHA in Bid to Resolve Dispute", <http://www.pff.org.pk/node/143>
- Parsons, Ruth (1946), "The Indian Electorate", Far Eastern Survey, 15(3), Feb 1946, pp 44-77.
- Rizvi, Syed Mubbashir Abbas. "Masters Not Friends: An Ethnography of a Land Rights Movement in Pakistan". MA Thesis, University of Texas at Austin, 2006.
- Sayeed, Khalid bin (1980), Politics in Pakistan: The Nature and Direction of Change (New York: Praeger).
- Schechtman, Joseph B., (1951), "Evacuee Property in India and Pakistan", Pacific Affairs, 24:4, pp 406-413.
- SDPI. Summary - Land Rights for Muslim Women: Review of Law and Policy. Working paper. 2008. Sustainable Development Policy Institute, Islamabad. <[www.sdpi.org/research\\_Programme/human\\_development/wlr/wlr\\_summary-law\\_and\\_Policy\\_final.pdf](http://www.sdpi.org/research_Programme/human_development/wlr/wlr_summary-law_and_Policy_final.pdf)>.
- Shah, Syed Qamaruzzaman. (2003), Personal Interview.
- Sherani, Saifur Rehman (2006), "No Fair Play in Land Acquisition", *Dawn*, 29 September 2006.
- Shehzad, Mohammad. (2003), "Fighting the Army, For Farm Land", *Frontline*, Vol:20, Iss :14.  
URL:<http://www.flonnet.com/fl2014/stories/20030718001106300.htm>.  
Retrieved on February 13, 2009.
- Siddiq, Ayesha (2007), Military Inc.: Inside Pakistan's Military Economy (Karachi: Oxford University Press).
- "Tax Free Zones in Gwadar Planned: Wooing Foreign Investment", *Dawn*, 17<sup>th</sup> June 2005.
- Waseem, Mohammad. (2002), "Causes of Democratic Downslide", Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 37, No. 44/45, pp. 4532-4538. JSTOR.
- Wong, J.Y. (1997), "British Annexation of Sind in 1843: An Economic Perspective" Modern Asian Studies, Vol. 31, No. 2, pp. 225-244. JSTOR.
- World Bank. (2001), "Pakistan Poverty Assessment 2001", Mimeograph. (Washington DC: World Bank)
- Zaidi, S. Akbar (1999), Issues in Pakistan's Economy (Karachi: Oxford University Press).