

Question of land reforms in Pakistan

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THE rural society and agriculture sector of Pakistan is chained by feudal relationships which has given birth to an evil land-tenure system with a high degree of land concentration, absentee landlordism, insecurity of tenure for share-croppers and low agricultural productivity.

According to a report, around ten million children are doing labour in brick kilns, farms, carpet manufacturing workshops and restaurants and another twenty million workers engaged in agriculture and industry work as bonded labour. Feudalism is the real problem and all other problems stem from it. The feudal lords and their allies constitute only five per cent of our agricultural households and own 64 per cent of our farm land. The rest of the 95 per cent are only their political vote-bank.

The total land area of the country is about 803,940 square kilometres. About 48 million hectares, or 60 percent, is classified as unusable for forestry or agriculture and consists mostly of deserts, mountain and demographic settlements. About 21.9 million hectares is being cultivated. Nearly 65 per cent of the cropped area is in Punjab, perhaps 25 per cent in Sindh and 10 per cent in the NWFP and in Balochistan. Farming is Pakistans largest economic activity.

In Punjab, tenancies are split more evenly between share and fixed rent contracts. Landlords in Punjab are much smaller than those in Sindh, with a median holding of only seven acres of land, and are more likely to be residing in the same village as their tenants. In Sindh, more than one third of the land is tenanted and about two-thirds of land is under sharecropping, a form of farming where output is shared between the landowner and tenant.

Sharecropping is the predominant form of tenancy in Sindh where the land ownership distribution is particularly skewed. According to a study, a median landlord in Sindh owns 28 acres of land, whereas nearly 80 per cent of the share-tenants are landless farmers. Big landlords in the province often employ kamdars to manage their tenants.

Unlike India, Pakistan did not carry out essential land reforms soon after independence and has, as a result, failed to facilitate the much-needed transition of productive relations from feudal-agrarian stage to industrial one. However, three isolated attempts were made to reduce landholdings at intervals but these could not bring feudal system to an end. In the early 1950s, provincial governments attempted to eliminate some of the absentee landlords or rent collectors, but they had little success in the face of strong opposition.

In January 1959, General Ayub Khans government issued land reform regulations that aimed 'to boost agricultural output, promote social justice, and ensure security of tenure.' A ceiling of about 200 hectares of irrigated land and 400 hectares of non-irrigated land was placed on individual ownership; compensation was paid to owners for land surrendered. Numerous exemptions, including title transfers to family members, dampened the impact of the ceilings. Slightly fewer than one million hectares of land were surrendered, of which a little more than 250,000 hectares were sold to

about 50,000 tenants. The land reforms failed to lessen the power or privileges of the landed elite.

In March 1972, the Z. A. Bhutto government announced further land reform measures, which went into effect in 1973. The landownership ceiling was lowered to about five hectares of irrigated land and about twelve hectares of non-irrigated land; exceptions were limited to an additional 20 per cent of land for owners having tractors and tube wells. The ceiling could also be extended for poor-quality land. The owners of confiscated land received no compensation, and beneficiaries were not charged for land distributed.

Official statistics showed that by 1977 only about 520,000 hectares had been surrendered, and nearly 285,000 hectares had been redistributed among about 71,000 farmers. The 1973 measure required landlords to pay all taxes, water charges, seed costs, and one-half of the cost of fertilizer and other inputs. It prohibited eviction of tenants as long as they cultivated the land, and it gave tenants first rights of purchase. Other regulations increased tenants security of tenure and prescribed lower rent rates than had existed.

The ceilings on private ownership of farmland in 1977 were further reduced to about four hectares of irrigated land and about eight hectares of non-irrigated land. Besides, agricultural income became taxable but small farmers owning ten hectares or fewer were exempted. The military regime of Zia ul-Haq did not make efforts to implement these reforms. Governments in the 1980s and early 1990s avoided any significant attempt at strict implementation of the land reform measures, because they got much of their support from landed aristocracy of the country.

Agrarian reforms in Pakistan have never transformed rural society in the context of property structure and production relations. The limits in reforms were fixed in terms of the individual but not family holdings, which resulted in transfer of land to family members and relatives. In times of the military rule, feudal lords support the ruling junta to protect their system. And the military badly needs them.

Even after three waves of land reforms, 3,529 zamindars have 5,13,114 holdings of more than 100 acres in the irrigated areas, and 3,32,273 holdings exceeding 100 acres in un-irrigated areas. Some 7,94,774 Khatedars have 54,64,771 land holdings of less than 12 acres in irrigated areas. In un-irrigated areas 1,44,098 are reported to have 16,28,826 holdings of less than 24 acres.

Land reforms play an important role in reducing poverty and empowering the poor farmers. In Pakistan, the power of landed aristocracy has acted as a barrier to social and economic progress of the rural society. Genuine land reform can help solve the problems caused by the fact that farmers often use relatively inefficient capital-intensive techniques due to distorted market prices and that small farmers do not have access to the liberal credit subsidies on imported machinery and capital equipment.

Under any scheme of serious reforms, the land ceiling should be fixed at 50 acres irrigated and 100 acres non-irrigated land. The necessary legislation should be done in favour of land reforms and Haq-e-Shifa. All laws and regulations regarding land developed under colonial era need to be abandoned and a judicial commission on land utilisation should be formed to check exceeding commercialization of land. Under Haq-e-shifa, the agriculture land of about 8 acres should be allotted to the landless agriculture workers and peasants families. The agriculture land occupied by or allotted to military forms and government departments should be revoked and distributed among the landless peasants under the principle of Haq-e-shifa.

Corporate farming should not be promoted. Allotment of forest land to the influential persons has to be revoked and re-allotted to the peasants on the condition of re-forestation. The occupied surveyed

or un-surveyed lands in Kacho, Kaachho, Kohistan, Kach, Bailpat, Thar, Thal and elsewhere in the country must be re-surveyed and distributed among the landless peasants and agriculture workers families.

Equitable distribution at the tail-end is imperative. It is necessary that all disputed irrigation projects including Kalabagh dam are given up and water requirements of Indus Delta fully met. To avoid water logging and salinity, the canals, branches and watercourses should be lined. The government must draw up an agriculture policy with the consultation of agriculture scientists, peasants, agriculture workers and growers.

The parliament should be persuaded to pass a legislation for protection of the peasant's rights, allowing them to have their trade unions, ensuring social justice and providing old age benefits to them.

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