

Do we need another land reforms

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Abolishing of Zamindara system (landholdings by feudals) under land reforms in India and the then East Pakistan now Bangladesh soon after partition of the sub-continent is generally cited as an example of economic stability in those parts of this region.

While the undisturbed existence of feudal power since inception of this country is blamed for cruel exercise of power in the society. As a whole, its hold on poor rural masses and ultimate appearance of feudals in active politics and legislative assemblies causing negative politics, loss to national exchequers, economic bankruptcy and all sorts of socio-economic and political corruption in the country.

The reasons for alleging the feudals is obvious because despite having lands rich of milk and honey, the agriculture sector has so far failed to cater to the needs of the people and a huge amount of foreign exchange approximately about \$1 billion is spent every year on imports of wheat and edible oils in Pakistan.

Official figures reveals that the total land under cultivation is around 23.04 million hectares out of which the net area sown for different crops is estimated at 16.70 million hectares. However currently the net available area for cultivation is over 24.62 million hectares.

The break-up of land utilization indicates that 8.3 million hectares is used for wheat crop, 2.4 million hectares for rice, around 3 million hectares for cotton, and the rest of the land is used for cultivation of Bajra, Jowar, Miaze, Barley, grains, grams, Sugarcane etc. The utilization of this land yields 18-19 million tonnes of wheat, 4.5-5 million tonnes of rice and 8-9 million bales of cotton and other food crops stated above. Out of these crops except cotton and rice, the agriculture sector is unable to produce enough to feed 140 million population of the country. Despite having potential and resources the country has to rely on imports to meet its wheat, pulses, edible oil and other needs what to speak of export surplus in these items.

Is feudal and Sardari system is really responsible for our economic shortcomings was the question we asked from M.H. Panhwar a veteran agriculturists of Sindh.

Dilating upon the subject, Panhwar said that first of all let us examine if feudalism as has been imagined, actually exists in Sindh. Panhwar said that Ayub's Land-Reforms put a ceiling of 12,000 units or 500 acres holdings per person in 1959. Many zamindars surrendered their lands, as it meant to 500 acres in the best soil areas and about 900-1000 acres in the poor soils areas where mostly rice was grown. Landlord transferred the land to their sons and daughters and many saved 3,000 to 5,000 acres in the rich or poor soil areas respectively. They expected another land reform and therefore did not buy new lands in Kotri, Sukkur, and Guddu barrage command, where about 5.5 million acres were

released over the next 10 years. This land then was sold mostly to outsiders under various quotas. The landless farmer got only 2% i.e., 100,000 acres of this 5.5 millions acres. Nobody sympathised with them in 1960s.

There was a feeling that Land Reform meant crippling the power of Sindh's zamindars to buy more land and thus leave a vacuum specially for defence forces, officers and businessmen to buy land. Since these buyers were not agriculturists, they ultimately sold the land to the locals over next 20 years and of 5.5 million acres 80% was sold out.

The 1972 Land Reform restricted land holding to 8,000 production units or about 200 acres . The total land surrendered in Sindh was 65,000 acres or half of one percent out of some 13.5 million acres in the barrage command. There was no cheating but the zamindars were ready and had already distributed the land among their children. Within 13 years between two Land Reforms population increased rapidly. Anticipating future Land Reform zamindars had started distributing the land among their sons, daughters, son-in-laws, daughter-in-laws, besides their minor children if any. This if some body had retained 5,000 acres due to family of 10 persons now could add 8 more persons if none of their sons and daughters had produced any children. The land holding per person therefore had already reduced to about 250-300 acres and if they had produced children, these further reduced to about 100 acres by 1980-1985. It should be known that a family of father, mother and children of 1959 has now increased to more than 60 due to addition of son-in-law and daughter-in-law and many children and to-day's holdings per person are less than 100 acres. In 1999 the family of 10 of 1959 has multiplied to about 30. Added to that are another non-family members of son-in-laws and daughter-in-laws accounting for another 8-10 person. This shows what are land holding per person ? These people do not live in a joint family as it is generally believed in cities. Each of the brothers and sisters live separately and since land is the only resource of livelihood in the rural areas, they have already divided the land and are supervising it separately. They are so hard pressed for money that they take loan against the land for its development but spend only a small part for that purpose and the rest is utilised for their pressing needs.

M.H. Panhwar feels that the urban people are just mis-guided by luxurious living of few people riding Pajeros, wearing white shalwar and kameez pressed with starch in which they look like a fat, big bellied person. Some of them are politicians and others having political connections and many of them have made money due to their political connections with the corrupt governments of the past, or just taken bank loans. Interestingly they do belong to feudal community of 1950s but they now survive by outward show and never payback bank loans due to political connections. They are Zamindare-Zorawar of Aurangzebs period, who never paid taxes.

These politicians, he pleaded, are able to get votes not because of their land holding but because the two parties PPP and Muslim-League have some appeal among the voters. They have never given both parties a chance to pick-up better workers. This definitely is political trickery of ex-feudals to have grip over the power, but this has nothing to do with their politics. Such political forces also dominate urban politics.

About 90 per cent of the land in Sindh is mortgaged with the banks. They are not able to pay is another story. The prices of most of agriculture commodities fixed by the Federal Government are 50% of the International prices, while all inputs are marketed at more than International prices. The margin of profit from the land is very small. At the present prices of land no crop can be grown economically if capital for purchase of land and input is borrowed. This is also applied to fruit crops. Even if the capital cost of the land is not considered, the fruit crops can not break even within 12-13 years at the present prices structure. Such is the neglect of agriculture and Federal government action of suppressing the prices, which has now lead to rural and urban bankruptcies.

In his opinion there are no feudals left in Pakistan and the people living in the urbanized centres are fishing in the empty waters. Panhwar says that people in town have seen rural feudals in the television serials. They are just imaginary stories, but also highly entertaining. They give an impression about the feudals as the national enemy, who every one would like to butcher, but such a creature to-day does not exist in rural society. Panhwar strongly observed that fact is otherwise that most of the Waderas (elders) of bye-gone days, acted as elders and tried to do justice and if some were bad all neighbouring Waderas reformed him by elderly advice. This is story of at least 1300 years feudalism in Sindh, which urban elite sees through distorted glasses.

Panhwar in the light of his Eexperience said that it is the middle class farmer growing 50 to 100 acres of land, who has capital, management ability and know-how of agriculture and he alone is able to get most money out of small holding. More than 100 acres, is too large for him to manage, and get similar returns per acre and less than 50 acres uneconomical for self cultivation. Thus the estimation that every owner cultivator will get highest production if land is distributed on 1t among farmers is just imagination of fertile mind and is un-realistic. We have already come to the level of 50-100 acres per family and further fragmentation will reduce the productivity, he warned.

As far as decline in productivity is concerned due to further fragmentation of landholdings is a point of view of M.H. Panhwar which he has right to express. However a case study of the land holdings in the neighbouring India and other countries specialised in agriculture sector indicates that only properly looked after lands irrespective of the size of the holdings yield good results. The per acre yield in India and other developed countries like Australia, New Zealand and the United States is 3-4 time more as compared to the yields in Pakistan. Unfortunately, the craze of holding lands in Pakistan by the absentee land lords is the root cause of draining out the precious natural resources to the waste. Since the agriculture income has been remain out of the ambit of the tax regime it offers great attractions for tax evasion not only for the big land lords but also to the industrialists who use the landholdings as safe haven to hoodwink the revenue collectors.

An immediate target for the agriculture sector in Pakistan is to get rid of imports of wheat which is the basic food item of the majority of the people in this country. This year the country is again required to import at least 3 million tonnes of wheat to cater to 140 million people of this country.

As per average of last two years, the yield per hectare of what in Punjab was 2,277 kilogram while in Sindh it was 2,378 kilograms while NWFP produced 1,451 and Balochistan 2331 and Azad Jammu Kashmir 1,060 kilograms per hectare.

As far as Sindh is concerned it produced 23,44,842 tonnes in 1995-96, 24,43,926 tonnes in 1996-97, 26,59,351 tonnes in 1997-98 and 26,75, 106 tonnes in 1998-99 which indicates progressive increase in yield per acre. Devoted efforts and concerted efforts associated with scientific approach are needed to make each province not only self sufficient in food but producing export surplus to give a strong helping hand to the national economy.

Now is the time when only level ground, both to the manufacturing sector as well as the agriculture sector, is strictly recommended to bail the national economy out of the present crisis.