

Can money compensate? Gain and loss accounts from urbanizing villages of south-eastern Lahore, Pakistan

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Introduction

Southeast Lahore has been undergoing massive transformation since 2000. The change in physical landscape took on a hectic pace with the construction of the new Allama Iqbal international airport, adjacent to the old airport on the south-eastern fringe of Lahore city. This area is dotted by dozens of historical villages which till 1947 lay sandwiched between the twin cities of Lahore and Amritsar (India) that are 50 km apart. Today, the international border between India and Pakistan divides this area almost in half. Two major roads (Burki and Bedian) run almost parallel and connect Lahore with rural areas. This is a rich agricultural land, watered by the Bambanwala-Ravi-Bedian (BRB) Canal and its distributaries. These villages feed the city and are also a source of manpower. At present, it is a desirable place for investors and realtors, rolled back by the state for buying land from the vulnerable, excavating topsoils and dumping them underneath road carpets to raise the level up to 1 m (see Fig.2), transforming food-producing resources into gated communities in the name of 'development' by externalizing all social and environmental costs.

My research looks at the role of cash compensation for land in villages southeast of Lahore, which has witnessed rapid development into gated housing for the affluent. This development has been led by the most influential player, Defense Housing Authority (DHA), managed by the army. Some villages have been demolished, others are at various stages of dislocation and resettlement and in-situ change. The need for cash has been on the rise for the last 50 years with increasing use of industrial inputs for farming and the taste for an urban lifestyle. However, a rural culture prevailed. Small farmers and milk producers subsisted on their own holding and on food supply to the large market of Lahore city. A host of waged workers, minor artisans and small businessmen worked between the village and the city. The land-owning, cash poor villagers have seen tremendous income from land sales. Even those who received money have not fared well equally. High social inequality and acute environmental degradation (Bebbington & Batterbury 2001, Narain 2009, Sali 2012) has enveloped many historical villages. The peripheral urbanization has not only shifted populations from one place to another and transformed the physical landscape but as an

entangled ecological process with material, social, political, and financial threads tied people and land in a web of new relationships. The framework of Marxist's urban political ecology (Swyngedouw & Heynen 2003) helped unraveling actors, institutions, the role of power dynamics in reconfiguring social structures on urban frontiers, who are the 'real' beneficiaries of the development processes and how they are responsible for destabilizing rural ecologies.

Methodology

Eight years (2014-2022) of ethnographic research has been used as a methodology to study the village as a microcosm of socio-ecological change through the voices of the people across gender, class, ethnicity, and generation. Primary data collection was based on semi-structured, in-depth interviews in villages in the south-east of Lahore around Burki and Bedian road, manifesting stages of development through land commodification for urbanizing the periphery. The fieldwork predicated on fieldnotes, photographic documentation, participant observations, followed by transcribing interviews and decoding data. This research attempts at recording the historical trajectory by comparing and analysing the older villages, usually the border villages, and contemporary settlements to comprehend the process of social change in community over the years. Currently, these villages are at different phases of urban transformation. Villages like Pathanwala, Hirasingsh and Jalalabad have been supplanted by symbols of modern development such as roads, malls, gated housing schemes etc. Some have been ghettoized, enclosed, and walled off by the new settlements such as Charar, Kalasmaari, Lehnasingh, Harpalkay. Some are transforming the appearance by being at their place such as Kohriyan, Dhoorwala. Whereas settlements like Burj and Rakh Padri on military farmlands show a different picture, the façade is in transition but keeping intangibles intact. Change detection analysis, based on remote sensing was the quantitative method to see the spatial change over time. Secondary data was acquired through literature reviews, editorials, poems, folklores, memoirs, and one-on-one conversations with experts (historians, architects, activists, and planners).

Development versus environment

The conspicuous change is characterised by landscape transformation induced by two major processes: land and soil acquisition processes. The land acquisition process lacks transparency. Land acquisition processes accommodate third parties as investors/land brokers hired by DHA itself. The investor/broker is usually a trusted member of the community, who helps fix deals at the lowest possible rate through bargaining and gradually upping the rates with respect to flexibility or rigidity of the holder. Those investors, who make a deal with landowners, fix the prices. The owners are then paid by the investors and the land ownership files are transferred to the investor's name. Thus, the investor provides land to DHA by purchasing it from landowner and he himself becomes the owner of land (which was supposed to be given to the former proprietor as compensation). However, the landowner ends up exchanging his property for one-time cash offer. DHA does it secretly to avoid people having time to organize to resist. They begin with acquiring parcels for sale to big investors. After taking over the agricultural land, they erect a boundary wall where locals are not allowed to enter and leave the land fallow to let it die on its own pace.



Fig. 1: Gold turning into dust. Processes of land-use change through land and soil acquisition. Five feet of village topsoil (the most fertile part) being removed for transportation to DHA (Photo: H. Javaid 2021)

The soil acquisition process is another way to compel people to leave their farms for the rich. It is a simple process in which the compensation amount is fixed between landowners and contractors. Land remains under the possession of the landowner, but the soil is sold to the contractor. The extracted fertile topsoil is used to raise the road level (Fig. 1). The topsoil sold by farmers is the soul of a land and removal of an inch of topsoil needs 500 years to get naturally replenished (USDA 2003). Selling topsoils cripples the land that cannot produce as it is used to before (Cosier 2019). Ecology has been degraded in multiple ways. Else than making land unfit for crop production, the agricultural lands have been used as waste disposal sites by the municipality.



Fig. 2: New Landscape - land being prepared for DHA extension, roads raised with topsoil sold by the villagers (Photo: H. Javaid 2021)

Other ways for expelling people from the land is by coercion and violence (physical and psychological). It is done through cutting gas and electric connections, disrupting the water channels, not allowing villagers to leave their cattle outside the premises of erected walls, creating problems through improper to unavailable waste disposal and sewerage system. Every single village highlighted the contamination of water due to septic tanks of the surrounding gated communities. There are incidents of resistance from villagers turned into brawl that lead to casualties.

The other popular site for landgrab is graveyards where the only condition for compensation was a documentary proof with the deceased and the unmarked graves shifted without a compensation. The maximum bid being heard so far for selling a grave to DHA is 10 lacs (appr. 3550 Euros; villagers 2022). This phenomenon is yet not as rampant because people still are culturally and emotionally tied to the place not only because of their departed loved ones, but also because they want to secure a piece of land for their burial which otherwise has become a costly business to attend. Graveyards or shrines have served multiple purposes to rural dwellers, as open common space, a spot to get together, annual festivals and grazing land for livestock and serves as an identity of a village as well.

Village - Microcosm of socio-ecological change

In keeping with the broad landholding profile of Lahore district (GOP 2011), small landholdings and intense cultivation define the local ecology of eastern periphery of Lahore city. Most of these villages do not have large landowners, but people with the ownership of small pieces of land whereas the majority is landless. This is why there was a relative equality in poverty. Depending upon the size of arable land and the offer they get, the economic status for a few may have elevated, but in general owners of acres of land in the past now cannot afford buying from DHA and ended up in cramped housing. Most of these villages that have been pocketed by the gated

communities be it DHA, other actors such as Paragon and Imperial Garden, have become service sectors for the elite. Despite material gains, villagers unanimously lamented over the loss of intangible assets what used to determine their quality of life and what cannot be weighed out with money. People report to have lost their food, water is contaminated, they are forced to sell their animals due to non-availability of the open space, the sense of security is lost due to the fragmentation of the community. Therefore, losing a community is tantamount to losing roof over one's head for them. The relations they built over time by sharing space and time, give them sense of belonging and identity which holds them back from moving to better-off localities. Women have been affected the most through this 'development' that has not only engaged them in four walls but has damaged their physical and emotional health. Women are way more embedded in their ecology and environment (Agarwal 1989, Carpenter 2014), treat everything around them as part of their family be it animals, soil, crops, trees. From working together on farms to making bread in clay ovens, were not just chores but sharing of space for bonding (Jane 2010). At multiple occasions rural dwellers drew attention to cleavage that cash influx had accentuated amongst community, between sects and ethnicities. It is no longer possible for people to hide their standing in the society.

Conclusion

The south-eastern periphery, a latecomer in the process of development has been carrying the brunt of urbanization, which was once reserved for agriculture. Infrastructure construction (road networks and gated communities for the elite) has intensified the marginalization of the poor and has robbed people from their subsistence. Food security, access to clean water, productive farmlands, fruit

trees and healthy soil – all such natural resources are on the line without due consideration. DHA – a brand in housing and one of the most lucrative army's business ventures has established its influence and power for the longest time (Siddiqi 2007). The role of the state in facilitating urbanization and encouraging investments in land fosters socioeconomic inequalities. This area has become a hub for real-estate business accelerating because agricultural lands are cheaper to buy, and it is easier to expel the poor (Denis 2018). The 'development' that has brought immense 'regression' has been carried out with merciless scrapping of topsoil from poor farmers in dire need for cash. From a world where dependency on cash was minimal, they have shifted to market economy where money is required to buy only what the market offers including the resources (tangible and intangible such as connections, security, community, time, culture for sharing, food, water, clean air, etc.) which they once had for free and in abundance too. Villagers know that compensation is one-time offer, hence, their foremost priority is to provide education to their children and marriages. However, the modern education further disconnects the younger generation from their environment and the local language is also disappearing. People who have gained through this process could not hold themselves back from mentioning the losses and damages in the process which are far bigger and beyond repair. This research has looked at the process of urbanization and development through people's lived environments, their mundane activities, day-to-day lives and concluded that assets which once gave villagers a quality life, can never be compensated. Social fragmentation, ecological damage and rural dwellers' deteriorating lives can't be seen through state-of-the-art architecture.

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