

Pauperization and migration: the continuing violence of Green Revolution in rural Punjab, Pakistan

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Introduction

This essay is based on the findings of a research started in 2018 to interrogate the rising number of rural migrant women working as maids in middle class homes in the metropolitan city of Lahore in Punjab, Pakistan. Rural-to-urban migration is an ongoing process in developing countries and the rate of urban growth in Pakistan surpasses its neighbors in South Asia. The Green Revolution (GR) in the mid-1960s introduced mechanization as well as synthetic fertilizers and pesticides, and transformed the agrarian mode of production in Punjab. GR rendered large numbers of sharecroppers and agricultural labour surplus forcing men from villages to cities in search of livelihoods. Typically, until the 1990s, women's migration to the city was marriage-based (Ahmed 2020, Arif 2005). Rural families sent men to work in the cities while the family stayed on in the village.

Post 1990s, there has been a feminization of labour and migration in the globalized economy. Domestic work has emerged as a major occupational category for rural migrant women across the world including the countries of the Global South (Killias et al. 2020, Labadie-Jackson 2008, Agrawal 2006, Ehrenreich & Hochschild 2003). The phenomenon of increased employment amongst women in the Global South increased the demand for domestic help for childcare in the absence of broad social support systems by the state. While research on maids in Pakistan is focused on conditions of work in the city (Zulfiqar 2018, Shahid 2009), our ongoing study aims to interrogate the rural conditions forcing migrations for domestic labour in urban Punjab, Pakistan.

This extended abstract is based on ongoing research which started in 2018. Our study aims to investigate the conditions in rural Punjab forcing women to seek employment as domestic help in the city. This research was conducted in the city of Lahore and some 25 villages across Punjab, a vast region with diverse agro-ecological zones. Most of the villages were in central Punjab, which is more developed and is dominated by small land holdings, fewer interviews were conducted in the south. The research methodology was qualitative interviews, and focus group discussions with maids in Lahore and a range of rural actors in villages. In the city, we

recorded and transcribed detailed interviews with maids who had migrated in the last 10-15 years to Lahore city and held three focus group discussions in working class neighborhoods. In addition, we interviewed representatives of a non-government organization working to unionise domestic workers in Lahore. In the villages, we conducted interviews with landless peasants, farm labourers, rich and middle farmers, local health professionals, agricultural department personnel and school teachers. The wide range of interviews aimed to understand the social and ecological conditions of the sending village environment of the maids in the city.

Long shadow of the Green Revolution and its colonial legacy

British policies transformed the socio-ecological landscape of rural Punjab in the mid 19th century as new arrangements of land ownership, crop choices, market and infrastructure were imposed to further colonial extraction (Bhattacharya 2019, Agnihotri 1996, Ali 1988). It set the path towards a dependent, semi-feudal, and semi-colonial mode of production.

The British annexed Punjab in 1849 and carried out a comprehensive settlement of the land. In this first onslaught, the British introduced the concept of private ownership of land. Earlier, land was deemed to belong to the ruler who could award it to those he or she patronized for military or tax collection purposes but there was no concept of legal land ownership by individuals. The privatisation of land was a major social intervention in society and categorically created a class of owners and landless in the countryside (Talbot 2011, Ali 2002). According to the census of 1881, half the population of Punjab were declared non-agricultural castes and denied any ownership in land.

The colonists consolidated the existing hierarchy in the villages in a substantive way and generally made the farming upper castes owners of land. They deprived the traditional crafts and service providers of their livelihood in addition to usurping the common land on which the vast number of pastoral communities and lived through hunting, fishing and other non-settled land based subsistence. Land was the primary means of production in the vast expanse of the Punjab. With this land allocation policy the

landless people became totally dependent on the landlords for their food. They have continued to be so into the present times especially in Pakistani Punjab where no major land reforms were undertaken unlike Indian Punjab (Hussain 1984). This history, which is well documented, was corroborated in our interviews. An elite landlord in Warburton narrated how his own family had been given land by the British for providing recruits for the colonial army. All the landless informants interviewed belonged to the lowest castes of artisans or tribes and recalled that their elders subsisted through livestock keeping, hunting, fishing or crafts.

All the interventions of the GR were designed to move production away from the indigenous subsistence needs and make local production part of the global imperialist economy (Cleaver 1972). Patel (2013) refers to industrial farming as 'agriculture without farmers' as it pushed the landless sharecroppers and small farmers out of farming. Either landlords took back land for farming with machines or the sharecroppers gave up farming as they could not pay for the water intensive new seed varieties which also needed synthetic fertilizers and pesticides (Hamid 1982).

These landless tillers were at the forefront of political struggle in the 1970s when a populist government promised land reforms but never accomplished any significant change in land ownership and quickly gave up on the policy. This unsuccessful struggle for land however became a signal for the landlords to change sharecroppers into contract farmers (Ali 2020, Hussain 1984)

In the absence of land and crafts the poor peasants made livestock their source of food and insurance for adversity. The shadow of the GR looms long into the present. Livestock needs feeding: abundant grazing commons in the rural areas in the past as well as a social contract with the landlords under which as part of their labour for working on landlords lands and looking after his cattle ensured the poor peasant feed for his one or two animals on landlords lands. With the gradual increase of industrial farming, the landlords' dependence on the poor peasant has decreased. The grazing commons have been grabbed and the social contract between the landed classes and the landless peasants for food and fodder has broken down. Landlords are not ready to give away any fodder without payment in cash or kind. In the words of a poor peasant '*Mul lai kay charaa nahein paaya ja sakda, hun janwar rakhn di gunjaish naein aay* (It is not possible to feed buffaloes and goats with feed from the market, it is not possible to keep animals anymore)' (Village Hakuwala, 29.4.2023). Thus, denial of access to grazing and fodder is depriving poor peasants of livestock, their mainstay without land.

The shrinking ability to rear livestock is also depriving landless peasants of milk, butter and

buttermilk. Even food sharing of *lassi* (buttermilk) and occasional vegetable, like *saag* (local leafy green) has been withdrawn by the rich peasants. Food is no longer a gift; it must be paid for by some work in the landlord's house. The poor peasants on their part are increasingly hesitant to work in the landlord's house or on his farm without payment (which is much less than the rate in the city for domestic work).

Drivers of rural-to-urban migration

Time and again our respondents spoke of life until the 1990s to be free of hunger. Their repeated refrain in Punjabi was '*bhook nahein si* (there was no hunger)'. A maid interviewed in Lahore recounted nostalgically about the quantity and quality of food she had as a child of an energetic sharecropper: 'we ate good food and always had extra grain' (Lahore, 19.8.2023). All of the interviewed landless peasants recalled that there was ample work of wheat harvesting and almost everyone in the village could amass wheat to last for most of the year and many had surplus grain as well as access to fodder and kept livestock. Amassing wheat as well as hay during the spring harvesting is the most significant activity for the poor peasants. The now ubiquitous use of harvesters and threshers in many areas has taken the work of harvesting away from the families of the landless. In a village off the main road about an hour from the metropolitan city of Lahore, a landless peasant recalled that a majority of the landless had milk animals and even the poorest had goats and chickens. In 2023, they had been unable to collect grain for the whole year and the animals had no uncultivated land to graze and consequently were confined to the courtyards, squeezing the living space. The landless did not even own the land on which they had built their home. The land belonged to the local landlord. During the populist government of Bhutto (1972-77) many landless were granted land for homes, but the policy could not be uniformly implemented (Gazdar and Mallah 2012).

Socio-ecologically the rural Punjab is degraded as a living space. The Green Revolution altered the mode of production and changed the village society. Interviewees reported that it is no longer a connected community with production based on local resources. A carpenter (Kala Shah Kaku, 2022) narrated how the landlords were freed from dependence on the carpenters for tools after the coming of tractors and paid them poorly for the occasional carpentry work such as fixing cots or doors and windows. Mechanization and use of chemicals has rendered the landless unemployed and hungry. Even small landowners reported that they are selling or renting land and moving to the city as their children are educated and there are no jobs in the village and the big landlords are mostly absentee farmers. Just as the change in the mode of production has disrupted the historical social structure of the village and created poverty it has destroyed it ecologically (Niazi 2004). There is in-

situ urbanization with new consumption induced by the spread of the cash economy post GR.

The effects of environmental degradation and socioeconomic change have further pushed rural-to-urban migration. It has led to a trend to shift to flush based toilets in the villages but there is no integrated sewerage disposal in the villages and homes require individual septic tanks which leak and pollute the water. The pollution of water is cause of rise in stomach diseases as well as added burden of work. The villagers are forced to acquire filtered or clean water, either from cleaner ground water near the canals or some distant filtration plant built by state or charities for the villagers. Gross pollution of groundwater from untreated sewerage water and leaching of agro-chemicals are a major ecological issue in rural Punjab (Ali and Jabbar 1992, Raza et al. 2017).

Other financial and social stressors in the environment are increasing the burden of disease. In the words of one maid '*hun log sugar tey blood pressure nu tey bimari ai nahein samajdey aay tey har doojay banday nu hay* (Now diabetes and hypertension are not even considered diseases, as every other person has them)' (Lahore, 24.4.2022). Maternal health is another area of increasing costs. Caesarean section births in hospitals and more often small private clinics in nearby towns are perceived as the norm. Villagers mostly blame the greed of the doctors and to a certain poor health of females who have less access to nutritious food than their mothers from the previous generation.

Electrification has added to the burden of cost of living tremendously as electricity costs have spiked since the liberalization regime initiated in 1998 (Munir and Khalid 2012). Electricity is now a basic need in the villages as water is pumped by motors from the ground and mobile phones need power for recharging. Mobile use has been structured into a necessity as governance has aggressively digitized and older means of communication and entertainment have disappeared. With the community broken security has also emerged as a major issue and male migrants are apprehensive of leaving their families in the villages.

Peasants and the violence of the city

While in city the poor peasant women get maid work readily for which they have the necessary skills. They become the main source of bread. Wage labour for men is erratic and harsher, although their wage is higher in the city. Dependency on women, in turn, generates bitterness among men and they become more aggressive with their own family. Quality of food has deteriorated and the maids were deprived of community that was a source of strength in the village. The cost of living including rent and electricity bills tends to exceed their earnings. Work by landless women is nothing new. Both men and women and even children had worked in the family.

But interviewees narrated that in the village it was a different type of work. One could control it to a degree and continue to run the household too; moreover, the joint family had more flexibility. The maid work for wage labour in the cities is perceived quite differently. It fully occupies you and is distant from home. It completely disrupts the household. It is also flexible, a maid could work more hours, a man too could drive his *Chingchi* (motorcycle rickshaw) for longer hours and earn more. This transaction economy has come to the village too. One could sell a share of the buffalo's milk and earn more. This flexibility, however, is compulsion in the garb of choice and eventually they end up selling all the milk, losing an important source of nourishment for the family.

Interviewees stated that the husbands have a dominant role, many beat up wives and children and use foul language. Yet the relationship continues. Interestingly it seems even when he is ill, not working and beating, his protective role is very important for the family. Divorce is uncommon; if the husband dies very early the family elders marry her off to husband's younger brother or such close relations along with her children. The second husband is generally even less caring and may not provide for the family but his protective role is valued again.

Illness is commonly reported, including typhoid, hepatitis, hypertension, diabetes and BP (high blood pressure), and respiratory diseases. Many men die early or cannot work. Many maids reported that invalid husbands may need care for many years and live off the wife. For some reason, there are more invalid and sick husbands than wives, according to interviewees.

Family debt is yet another characteristic of the maid's family in the village as well as in the city. Healthcare is one main reason for contracting debt, the other is children's marriages a third electricity. Debt is very difficult to pay back. It generally tends to become circular, to pay an old debt to A you contract a new debt from B. However, the maid's family debt is not as serious a problem as the small peasant farm debt which needs to be paid to businesses and institution (e.g. banks) and is constantly growing because of interest. Most of the family debit is paid in small installments not in one go.

Discussion and conclusion

Migration from countryside to the cities leads to the economic process of growth but is actually physical as well as social desertification. When a land becomes infertile whether for lack of water, because of too much water, or because of depletion of nutrients or organic content it is said to have become desertified. It is the same for a society.

Change in the mode of production through GR is leading the physical and social desertification of

rural areas in Punjab, finishing livelihoods, replacing moral economy, referring to livelihoods based on unpaid labour with the cash economy, and a consequent mass exodus of the landless. It is a violence in which poor peasants are losing the stability and food security they had enjoyed for centuries (Sobha 2007). The migration imposed by the GR is an irreversible linear process. It does not compare to the cycles of drought induced famines and migrations of pre-modern rural production. Those who leave the countryside would never return.

Rural culture entailed sharing, interdependence, milk based diet, home food factory, and hard work as well as leisure based activities and festivities. There was relative equality between the majority small and poor peasants in the village in terms of culture as everyone followed a similar dress, food, festivals and spoke the same language. The women and men too were more equal as women participated actively in production, farm labour and looked after the livestock. While women looked after children and did household chores in addition to their work in agriculture, it put double burden on the females, but there was a larger support of community and commons in her dual work life. The maid work in the city is atomized and psychologically stressful. Culture, community, tradition and rootedness had

made security of women as well as of the rural areas in general possible.

Pakistan like so many other countries of the global south, in neo-liberal times is undergoing de-industrialisation. Women led rural-urban migration to take up work as maids cannot be considered gender participation in productive work. This is not a migration of maids. These are peasant women who were already actively involved in the productive economy of agriculture and livestock. The only jobs on offer in the city are unproductive low paid work in the service economy. This social regression is a major chapter of the multifaceted violence wrought by the GR.

In the city, the cultural roots are completely cut and even the remnants are headed for a finish. Once in the city the family further dismembers losing connection to space, history, community and *bradari* (clan). As these bindings of self-respect loosen, individualism prevails. It becomes an issue of survival. The traditional moral code and value system is damaged and weakened. In neoliberal terms it however may be called emancipation from the shackles of tradition. This huge social change has introduced a major instability in the whole society creating chaos and destroying its ability to sustain and evolve.

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