

THE OKARA FARMS ISSUE

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This is not a story out of the Middle Ages, nor is it a tale from some remote small forgotten African country. No, it is a story from the heart of Pakistan in the 21st century. Deep in the heartlands of the Punjab you will find Okara where there is some of the most fertile land in all Pakistan.

In 1900 the British imperial Raj planned to develop a canal system for the agricultural development of the Punjab. The workers were hired and under great hardship they developed one of the world's best irrigation systems right here in the Punjab.

The British promised the labourers agricultural land as a reward for their work. Some families were settled in Okara and given tenant status. They were promised that within a certain period of time they would get outright ownership rights.

THE Okara farms (17,013 acres, or 6,805 hectares) were dense forests when they were given to the peasants in 1908 by the British government. The land was under the Punjab Revenue Board's administrative control.

The peasants were asked to cultivate it and promised ownership rights by 1914. In 1913, the Army took control of the land under a lease agreement with the Punjab government. This lease expired in 1933 and was renewed for another five years.

At the end of this period the lease was not renewed. The land was occupied by the Pakistan Army in 1947. Since then the Army has not sought a renewal of the lease and under the law it is a trespasser and illegal occupant. It has not paid the Punjab government for the share of the produce it has received from the peasants under the *batai* system.

Anjuman Mazain Punjab (Tenants Association of Punjab) is the representative organization of landless tenants on state land in Punjab province in Pakistan. Roughly one million tenants work on farms owned by the government of Punjab in more than 10 districts across the province. While the land is owned by the provincial government, the farms are actually operated by different government agencies including the military, livestock department, and Punjab Seed Corporation. These agencies have no legal claim to the land. Some of them had at one point or the other been lessees of the provincial government, but presently, none of the agencies are owners or lessees.

In 1999, the government promised to allot lands to the landless tenant farmers. In 2000, the farmers began to campaign for legal title to the farms. However, they were met with brutal repression including an attempt to alter their tenure arrangement on their farms, further affecting their already difficult livelihood. Violence and arrests have occurred as tenants have refused to give up their struggle for land ownership.

These agencies have been claiming harvest shares from tenants for decades, despite not being legal owners of the land. Unfortunately, the tenants have never seized the rights accorded to them under various tenancy acts in the country. In fact, in recent times, the operating agencies have attempted to disown the fact that tenants have been tilling the land for decades. These agencies have tried to change the tenure arrangement to a contract system, offering contracts of 3 to 5 years. Naturally, when these contracts expire,

the tenants can be evicted from the land, an eventuality that is prohibited under tenancy acts.

A contractual change instituted three years ago transformed the farmers from sharecroppers to renters. Many tenants are angered by the change, which they say is intended to drive them off the land at Okara Military Farms -- a 17,000-acre grain and dairy operation that is one of numerous Pakistani businesses run by the military. The tenants are refusing to pay their rent, and have staged a number of protests, several of which have turned violent.

The army has responded by cutting off water to the fields of rebellious tenants, sending troops to surround their villages and arresting hundreds of protesting farmers, some of whom say they or their relatives have been tortured to force them to pay rent. Seven villagers have died in clashes with police or paramilitary forces since the protest erupted in 2000, leaders of the tenant movement say.

As tensions between the army and the tenants have escalated in recent months, the standoff in this fertile region of Punjab province has become a focal point for growing public anger over the military's control of prized economic assets in Pakistan, from farmland and profit-making universities to major industries such as cement production and trucking.

Land is a potent symbol of the privileged status enjoyed by the military, which has ruled Pakistan for most of its 56-year history. The army chief of staff, Gen. Pervez Musharraf, is also the president.

Rapid population growth, insufficient water and a legacy of feudalism have made productive farmland increasingly scarce in Pakistan, where agriculture still provides the largest source of employment. Yet the military continues to dominate -- and occasionally add to -- a real estate empire that includes horse farms, tracts of irrigated croplands and prime residential property in major cities, much of which is allotted to senior officers as part of their retirement packages.

In that light, the Okara Farms dispute is "a symbol of the resentment people feel about the army's monopolization of power and resources.

"They've become such a huge corporate empire in this country, and the land-grabbing is just one part of it."

Instead of eradicating feudalism from the country, the rulers are creating military feudalism by snatching land from tenants in Okara and other areas of the country.

The Punjab revenue board had clearly stated that the Okara land which was given on lease to the army by the British government in 1930 now belonged to it, but the military bureaucracy was not willing to give up the precious land, which was made cultivable by tenants after decades of hard work.

We condemn the killing of more than a dozen tenants by the Rangers and demand a judicial probe into it at the high court level.

It was an attempt to alter the tenure arrangement on the military farms in Okara district in June 2000 that sparked the tenant uprising that has now become the most compelling resistance movement in the country. Anjuman Mazarain Punjab was formed as an organization that resisted the move towards contract arrangements, instead asking for permanent ownership rights, a slogan that General Musharraf has repeatedly used since coming to power in October 1999. As the movement spread, so did the panic within the

status quo. The movement for ownership rights has intensified over the past few months. Recently, in its issue dated May 30, *The Friday Times (TFT)* also published a small interview under the title “The Disadvantaged Will Organised Themselves Politically And Will Arm Themselves.....” The interviewee was Admiral (retired) Fasih Bokhari, the former chief of Pakistan Navy, who was the first to reveal that General Musharraf’s October 12 *coup d’etat* was a pre-planned event and not a spontaneous reaction to the attempts made by Nawaz Sharif to get the general killed, as the latter propagated for long. Admiral Bokhari is one of the persons who have followed the Okara siege by the military. In September last year, he spoke on the issue at the Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI) and expressed sympathy with the peasants’ movement, while urging General Pervez Musharraf to resolve the Okara crisis.

I got interested in the Okara farms issue after reading a pamphlet titled *Malki ya Maut* (Ownership or Death), the slogan of Anjuman Mazarieen-e-Punjab (AMP). (The name can be translated as the Association of Punjab Peasantry or Tenantry--- NN.) He said this powerful slogan reflected the peasants’ demand who had tenancy rights under the 1874 Punjab Tenancy Act, but are now being coerced by the army into giving these rights. “A contingent of rangers had been sent to Okara with orders to ensure that the unwilling tenants sign a document relinquishing tenancy rights in favour of lease agreement. The *mazarieen* believed that the leases would be cancelled in a year or two leaving them without the safety of livelihood they had under the Tenancy Act,” the admiral said.

The rangers and local administration tried to restrict the free movement “in my own country on the plea that there were Al Qaeda operatives in the area, from whom they needed to protect me!”

It “apparently had all the ingredients of our national malaise.” To me, these ingredients are --- “a dictatorial army, a compliant judiciary, a more-loyal-than-the-king administration, personalised autocratic political parties who see no benefit in raising their voice in support of the oppressed, a controlled press that prints the agency version rather than the victims’ version, vested groups trying to make a quick buck, or push their own agendas, and weak civil society organisations trying to do good at the cost of the victims.”

This seems to be a microcosm of the cry of the oppressed majority. Thus, “*Malki ya maut* was the same as (give us back the) ownership (of our country) or death,” I am supporter of the demand that the concerned tenants be made the owners of the farmlands they have been cultivating. But this is not very easy.

Why? Because “our laws, and current psyche, will not allow these tenants (the) rights they could ask for and probably get in a free country.”

“These lands are expensive real estate, and given the national psyche, there is no way these tenants, and many like them, who may be suffering more, can hope to benefit at the cost of the army and other large landowners.”

Yet, certain “civil society organisations and other groups” of “actually pushing their own revolutionary Leftist agendas.” Who are “giving false hope and pushing the politically disorganised peasants to confront well-organised power structures,” It as “immoral, if it meant that the peasants should face more bullets resulting in more deaths.” I warn that “the disadvantaged will organise themselves politically and will arm themselves,” but to avoid the imminent bloodshed “the mindset of the privileged must change, and service of the people must become the focus of the servants of the state.”

But is there anything new in it? Is history not replete with the stories of people, some of whom were well-meaning while others were crooks, who had been thinking and propagating that the downtrodden could be provided with justice and the structure of society may change for the better if only there is a change in "the mindset of the privileged" and the goal of "service of the people becomes the focus of the servants of the state"? And is not history also replete with instances that the downtrodden have won justice only by methods, which the "privileged" have always termed as "immoral"?

These poor peasants are still being subjected to brutal tyranny. To increase the efficiency of their terror methods the army has now even brought in cannons to be used against the villages. The people are thus now struggling for their very basic right to live.

This is a fight between the landless peasants and biggest landowner in Pakistan, the Pakistani army. This is a great burden on the moral conscience of the nation. Why are the sons and daughters of Pakistan not allowed to get the bread they have harvested after so much hard work? The fundamental question being posed is "Whom does the land belong to? Those who harvest it or those who hold the gun?"

We strongly support our brothers and sisters who are fighting for their rights, their heroic struggle for their land.

- Jis kheet se dehqan ko muasir na ho rozi!

- Us kheet ke her kosha-e-gandum KO jala do!

Our brothers and sisters in Okara must realize that this is the struggle between two classes, the haves and have-nots. Only true revolutionary tactics can guarantee long lasting economic freedom and prosperity. We are with you in every step of your struggle. On May 1, Rangers and police raided Chak (village) #9-4L in the Okara district, arresting two farmers, who were released after six days in detention. The next day, four tenant farmers from Chak #4-4/L were also arrested.

Hundreds of tenant farmers staged a peaceful sit-in protest on May 5 demanding the release of the detained farmers. Rangers and police opened fire, causing injuries to at least six people, including five women.

on May 6, the Okara police registered cases against more than 80 tenants, under various laws including the Anti-Terrorism Act 1997, for allegedly disrupting peace, shooting of the personnel of law enforcing agencies and inciting people against the government.

On May 11, tenant farmers again staged a peaceful protest. Choudry Abdul Jabar and Mehr Abdul Sattar, the two main leaders of the tenant farmers' movement, reported that the Rangers fired on the farmers for at least two hours.

The Okara police are refusing to investigate the death of Amir Ali, the farmer killed by the Rangers on May 11. The tenant farmers are refusing to bury Ali's body until an official investigation is initiated.

For some time, the Pakistan media ignored the agitation --- as if it were of little consequence. (Or because it was no saleable news?).

But a sad part of the story is that the country's mainstream political parties are still not very eager to take up the cause of the suffering and struggling peasantry of Okara. Even if they are concerned about the restoration of democracy in the country, as they profess from housetops, it seems the genuine problems facing the peasantry or other toilers do not form part of a democratic agenda!

Punjab Chief Minister Chaudhary Pervez Ellahi is helpless in the matter of providing relief to Okara's peasants. "We urged the Chief Minister to pursue the Okara case because

the land belonged to the Punjab government, but he expressed his helplessness," said Liaquat Ali.

malki ya maut Ayesha Siddiqa, Islamabad correspondent of *Jane's Defence Weekly*, says: "The tragedy is, the land belongs to the Punjab government, which is in no mood to challenge the Army's illegal occupation. It has become a tradition to treat the Army as a holy cow and not challenge its misdeeds. The Punjab government should take this matter to a court of law and thus a new precedent could be set in Pakistan's history that would lead to improving the peasants' plight."

former Prime Minister Benazir Bhutto, has condemned the military action in Okara and asked the government to give ownership rights to the tenants as promised by Musharraf during his referendum campaign. "The military high command should recognise the changing ground realities and intervene urgently with a view to preventing a clash with the poor people," Benazir said.

Army officials accuse groups of exploiting the Okara Farms tenants to further a leftist political agenda that has nothing to do with the facts of the dispute. They say they are charging the farmers below-market rents and deny efforts to drive them off the land. The contractual change, they say, is intended to improve the efficiency of a farming operation originally set up by the British in 1913 to feed their colonial Indian army troops and horses -- similar to the purpose it now serves for Pakistan's military.

"This is not an issue of human rights," said Maj. Gen. Mahmud Shah, director general of the Remount, Veterinary and Farms Corps, which oversees Okara and 23 other military farms. "This is a law-and-order situation."

The courts have supported that claim. In 2001, the high court in the provincial capital of Lahore ruled that in refusing to pay rent to the army, the farmers were "in possession of the property without any lawful basis."

"Legally they can't succeed," Hasan Rizvi, a former visiting professor at Columbia University in New York who has written several books on civil-military relations in Pakistan, said of the tenants' campaign. "To me, the villagers are being used."

But the army's assertion of ultimate authority over the land is also open to question, military experts say, because the actual owner of the land is the Punjab provincial government. The army pays a token fee to use the land, and two years ago the province refused an army request to transfer title to the property free of cost, according to a copy of an April 2001 letter from the Punjab Board of Revenue.

"The issue is there are two parties fighting over land which doesn't even belong to them," said Ayesha Siddiqa-Agha, an Islamabad-based military analyst for Jane's Information Group. Siddiqa-Agha worked in the late 1990s as deputy director of defense auditing under Pakistan's auditor general, the government's chief spending watchdog.

Army officials say Okara Farms provides the military with milk supplies over rugged mountain passes -- and thoroughbred racehorses and polo ponies that the army raises for sporting use.

Under the old sharecropping system, which dates to the farm's inception in 1913, the army supplied seed and fertilizer to the tenants, who then gave the army half of their crop. But three years ago, after concluding that corrupt civilian managers were stealing some of the army's share, military officials instituted a rent system, Shah said.

Because Pakistan's legal code provides fewer protections for renters than sharecroppers, the move sparked a rebellion from villagers, many of whose families had worked the

same land for generations and saw the change as a first step toward transferring ownership to military officers and private corporations ducts as well as fodder for pack mules -- used to haul army.