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Syed Mohammed Ali, *Development, Poverty and Power in Pakistan: The impact of state and donor interventions on farmers*. Routledge, 2015, 208 pp. \$128 Hardcover.

By Hashir MAJOKA[†]

Book Review

Rural development remains one of the most daunting challenges for developing countries, particularly those with an agrarian economy, like Pakistan. With over 60% of the population living in rural areas and employed in the agricultural sector, a number of policies and intervention has been devised by the Pakistani government, both alone and in conjunction with international donors, to better the lot of the poor farmers. This book, based on the author's PhD dissertation is a welcome addition to the scholarship on the topic as it presents primary research on the impact of the donor led policies in the lives of poor farmers in Pakistan. While it finds some divergences between the state policies and the international donors, it finds that more often than not, the landed rural elite have been able to benefit from the policies without any significant improvement in the lot of the very poor.

The book situates itself in the field by finding lacunas in the existing research which has been largely insular in its scope. Many academics have looked at the issues of land reform and state policies in Pakistan, while others have focused on the role played by the international donor institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and their international frameworks like Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP) which advocate increased market liberalisation and privatization. However, there has been a relative lack of a holistic approach in incorporating all these factors within a single theoretical framework to approach the subject- a framework that also incorporates the poor farmers' agency in tackling their own problem in organization peasant movements. The book also incorporates another factor: Pakistani military being a major landowner as a result of historical land grants. A fact that has also influenced and swayed the donor and state policies.

To this end, the study posits three basic questions which it seeks to answer. Firstly, how have the state institutions and policies dealt and coped with the problem of rural poverty in Pakistan, particularly in the agricultural heartland of Punjab and Sindh. Secondly, what has been the effect of the donor policies on the rural poor, farmer in particular. Finally why have the recent instances of collective resistance by poor farmers failed in their objective of ending their marginal position. Beside focusing on the state policies, the study also tackles the roles and

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import of other state institutions on the lives of the rural farmers, such as the judiciary, the executive and the legislative branches of the government, whose functioning directly affects the lives of poor farmers. In looking at donor policies, the study's primary focus is on the World Bank and its affiliated programs (e.g. PRSP) which have been extremely influential in influencing the state policies in Pakistan regarding the plight of poor farmers. For the final question, the study focuses on the mobilisation and resistance movements launched by landless farmers working for the military owned farms in the Punjab province and tries to analyze why these efforts failed.

Methodologically, the book relies on qualitative methods of extensive semi-structured interviews conducted with various elements of different stakeholders on the ground, from the poor farmers, to the government functionaries to NGO officials.

The book proceeds to historically contextualize the situation of poor rural farmers by looking at the historical evolution of the landed elite in the areas that now constitute Pakistan. It argues that the land grant schemes of the British colonial government helped consolidate the colonial regime's rule in the rural areas of the subcontinent but also ended up marginalising "all other rural classes involved in agricultural production, agricultural tenants, labourers and non cultivating service castes who had previously held claim to the produce of land, began increasingly dispossessed." In the late 19th century, these non-agricultural castes were estimated to number about half the rural population and their situation declined drastically as a result of the colonial policies. The military service too was rewarded by the colonial land settlement schemes and not only were serving and retired servicemen awarded tracts of land but the military as an institution also became a major landowner in this period. After the birth of Pakistan the situation continued with the rural elites and the military consolidating. The ushering in of the 'Green Revolution', with major help from international donors, led to a major jump in the agricultural production but its emphasis on mechanization and use of modern technology also largely benefited the big farmers. The poorer farmers lost out due to their inability to invest in capital intensive equipment such as tractors and artificial fertilizers. Increased mechanization also led to a lot of landless tenant losing land tenure.

The study argues that "large landowners, the Pakistani state and the donor agencies such as the World Bank, can in fact be described as having certain basic interests in common; such as the preservation of the basic social order, based upon the institution of private property." And yet, the relationship between the three was not always without differences such as on points like agricultural subsidies and agricultural taxation which were advocated by the donor agencies and fiercely resisted by the rural elites.

The book next presents a historic survey of land tenure in Pakistani provinces of Sindh & Punjab and concludes that "poverty in rural Sindh and Punjab remains inextricably linked to prevailing land tenure arrangements which have been shaped through and post-colonial regimes". As a result, poverty is rife among a significant portion of rural population; not only small farmers but also landless sharecroppers and daily and seasonal labourers.

The next part of the book tries to gauge the impact of state institutions and policies on poor farmers. In many ways this is the crux of the study and deals with topics as varied as legislation concerning the poor farmers, attempts at land redistribution, women's ownership of the land, the judiciary's role in preserving the rural status quo and the thorny issue of agricultural taxation, in an effort to ascertain and present a fuller on the ground picture of the contours of the rural poverty in Pakistan. After outlining and analyzing the role of each of those sectors

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in some detail, the author concludes that "Despite the constitutional guarantees to protect the rights of all citizens, a broad range of state institutions tend to preserve the interests of large landowners rather than addressing the underlying causes of widespread deprivation of the rural populace, which comprises poor farmers". Acknowledging the good intent behind some of the legislative measure, the study finds them to be in line with the market-oriented dogma of the international donor without taking into account the unique set of challenges present on the ground in Pakistan. It finds that the principle beneficiaries of these attempts to 'liberalize' the agricultural sector and bring it in tune with the international markets have been large landlords. It argues that the large land owners are uniquely positioned to take advantage of these policies as they are ones who can easily afford the increased costs associated with mechanization and expensive inputs such as fertilizers and high yielding seeds. Alternatively, they can simply lease their landholdings to corporate farms, in the process stripping poor farmers who would have otherwise tilled those lands as sharecroppers, of their livelihood. On the land reforms which have been dead in the water since the Pakistani Supreme Court ruled them "un-Islamic", the study notes the attempt to provide state land to landless peasants as an alternative, under the Benazir Landless *Hari* Scheme meant to particularly benefit landless women. However it seems that the scheme suffers from some flaws, not all recipients have been deserving and the parcels of land allocated have not been fertile enough to support many of the beneficiaries. In any case such limited efforts are unlikely to change the underlying structural problems causing widespread rural poverty in Pakistan, in any case. On the revenue collection front, the study notes the recent switch to a flat tax and fees for various government services. This also has the effect of reducing the revenue collection from the richer farmers and spreading it across to the poorer ones. Finally, the study takes note of the Pakistani state's continuous resistance to the donor's priority of ending agricultural subsidies. However it concludes that the principle beneficiaries of these subsidies are also corrupt government officials, large landholders and the middlemen.

The next part of the study looks at the donor influences on the agricultural development in Pakistan and analyzes various donor policies and their impact on the poor farmers. Once again, dealing with initiatives as varied as computerization of land records, the impact of corporate farming and basing it on primary research, the study bemoans the lack of emphasis placed by the donor community on an equitable distribution of means of production, something that would require a structural overhaul in the case of Pakistan to address the underlying causes. Based on field surveys, this part shows that "the underlying political economy of land ownership and power relation in Pakistan, are in fact, causing a range of unexpected market distortions, and creating service gaps which are ushering in profit driven multi-nationals to gain more control over the provision of agricultural inputs and extension services to the detriment of poor farmers". The study also finds that even the use of NGOs to provide micro-credit to poor farmers has led to a greater degree of indebtedness among them. Thus the study expresses its pessimism in regards to efforts at creating a market economy resulting in equitable growth in the agricultural sector without addressing the underlying causes of inequity.

The final part of the study focuses on the peasant resistance movements taking the case study of Anjuman Mazareen Punjab (AMP) and its stand against the administration of military farms in the Punjab province. It does so by contextualizing the movement and the issue both historically and socially. It then goes on to look at their movement and while acknowledging partial success in stopping the evictions of poor tenants, the movement failed in achieving its larger objectives. This is in part due to fault-lines within the movement along gender and

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religious lines and the ensuing tensions which sap the coherence of the movement. The rise of the movement itself was in response to the military farms' administration to commercialize the land tenure arrangements in line with the donor policies.

Finally, the study concludes that unless serious efforts are undertaken to bring about a structural reform which address the root causes of rural poverty and the glaring economic disparity in the rural areas, both the national and the donor-led policies are bound to fail. Too, the failure of the recent peasant movements (like AMP) does not mean that there won't be further unrest of efforts at organizing poor farmers in future.

All in all, this study fills an essential niche in looking at the policies and factors that determine the lot of poor farmers in Pakistan while using an integrated, holistic approach. Its scope is broad and its theoretical foundations are nuanced and comprehensive. Its principle strength lies in an excellent qualitative analytical approach anchored in extensive fieldwork which when coupled with an effective theoretical model, significantly enhances our understanding of the subject. It is a very welcome addition to the repertoire of analytical attempts at understanding the challenges facing the poor farmers in the developing world in general and Pakistan in particular.



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