

# West and East Punjab agriculture — a co

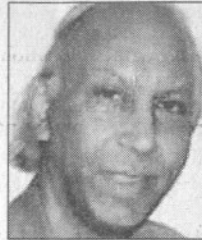
I SPENT MORE THAN THREE WEEKS IN PAKISTAN during December 2004 and twelve days of January this year in India. Except for Delhi, which is technically not part of Punjab but which has a fairly large Punjabi population (many of a West Punjabi origin), all my time was spent in the two Punjab: West and East.

I want to probe below why the Indian Punjab has done far better than the Pakistani Punjab in the agricultural sector. The yield per hectare in all essential crops: wheat, rice, sugarcane, maize, gram is far greater in East Punjab as compared to West Punjab and only cotton produce in West Punjab comes close to that of East Punjab (*Shinder S Thandi, International Journal of Punjab Studies, January-June 1997*). The result has been that the Indian Punjab has the highest standard of living in India and I could easily see that the villages there were far more prosperous than those in Pakistan. This is totally puzzling if one reviews the recent economic history of the undivided Punjab in perspective.

Before partition the excess population from the poverty-stricken and resource-deficient East Punjab had been allotted land in the canal colonies of Shahpur, Lyallpur (now Faisalabad) and Montgomery (now Sahiwal). The hardworking settler peasant-proprietors converted the former semi-desert areas of the western districts into the finest agricultural region in South Asia. At the time of partition, therefore, West Punjabi agricultural land was the choicest and its prosperity proverbial. East Punjab was poor in all senses of the word.

It is not surprising therefore that the Sikhs made every effort to have Shahpur, Lyallpur and Montgomery included in India asserting that it was their hard work and labour

## COMMENT



ISHTIAQ AHMED

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which had generated the wealth of the western districts. But all those areas and the coveted city of Lahore (where Hindus and Sikhs owned 80 per cent of the property) were awarded to Pakistan on the basis of clear Muslim majority by the Radcliffe Award of August 17, 1947. Thus the greater and best parts of Punjab remained in Pakistan and Punjabis in Pakistan became the dominant group in all conventional senses of political economy.

As a West Punjab Pakistani, I, therefore, expected to find the eastern half not only smaller but also 'junior' in some sense. After all West Punjab with its total area of 205,345 square kilometres (28.5 per cent of Pakistan) is population-wise the biggest province of Pakistan. Its 72,585,000 people constitute the biggest nationality: 48 to 61 percent, depending on whether or not you include Seraiki speakers among Punjabis. Its economic and political domination is resented by the other provinces. The most powerful institution in the country, the army, is solidly Punjabi. So is the senior civil bureaucracy. In sharp contrast, East Punjab is only 50,362 sq km (1.54 per cent of Indian territory) and its 24,289,000 people are only 2.5 per cent of the Indian population. Although Punjabi Sikhs are over-represented in the Indian army (7 to 8 per cent despite their less than 2 per cent share in the Indian population) they are not a dominant group politically. Moreover, 15 years of violent conflict between the Khalistanis and the Indian state (1974-1992) claimed some 60,000 lives and caused massive collateral damage to property and production.

What explains then East Punjab's agricultural success? I talked to MS Gill, the former chief election commission-

er of India and now a member of the upper house of the Indian parliament, the Rajya Sabha. He served as a senior policymaker on the agricultural sector for the Indian government and had done considerable research on this subject. He explained that a number of factors converged to bring about the great changes in East Punjab. At the centre of the transformation was indeed the Sikh peasant cultivator, often the Jat, whose courage, perseverance, spirit of enterprise and muscle prowess proved crucial. But even more important had been structural changes such as a radical land reform and co-operative farming. Big landlordism had been nearly eliminated and instead a sturdy class of independent peasants came about. The ceiling on landholding was fixed around 20 acres. Government support in the form of various subsidies and promotion of co-operative farming enabled several farmers to pool their resources and together buy a tractor and other related machinery. Additionally, government banks provided easy loans and the implementation processes had been really firm.

He told me that he had written a paper comparing the agricultural sector in both Punjab and already in the early 1970s shown that production per acre in East Punjab was at least double to that of West Punjab. He had learnt from Pakistani friends that Prime Minister Zulfikar Ali Bhutto read his paper and ordered his agriculture minister and senior bureaucrats to explain how this reversal of position of the two Punjab could be possible. Mr Gill never found out what explanation was given to the late Pakistani prime minister.

I found Mr Gill's explanation very convincing. The landlord class in West Punjab benefited most when

# Comparison

Pakistan came into being, although some progressive Muslim Leaguers wanted to bring about radical land reforms. The land reform of 1959 fixed the ceiling at 500 acres of irrigated land and 1,000 acres of un-irrigated lands; ZA Bhutto carried out a number of land reforms in the 1970s but the ceiling remained high: 100 acres. Moreover, pre-capitalist production relations such as absentee landlordism continued to prevail in the Pakistani Punjab. The Pakistan Army, instead of being an agent of modernisation, has itself been partisan on the land question and some of its high-handed policies against tenant-cultivators on the Okara military farms were recently in news.

I think even more damaging to West Punjab has been the growth since the 1990s of *jihadi* culture. Gujranwala, once a quiet, relaxed town of wrestlers, is considered currently the hub of fanatical Islam in the Punjab. Just as the Khalistani movement inflicted deep economic gashes on East Punjab the *jihadis* in West Punjab are nothing but a nihilistic lot. This menace needs to be weeded out completely. Moreover the Pakistani Punjab needs radical land reforms and infrastructural support from the state so that pre-modern cultural values and attitudes can be replaced with the sound economic sense of which our peasants have lots. We need independent peasant proprietors and not parasitical landlords or impoverished tenant-cultivators. Thus the slogan of a progressive and egalitarian Pakistan should be: all land to the tiller.

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# Poor irrigation main cause of poverty among farmers

*Daily Times*

By Hamid Waleed

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*Agriculture*

LAHORE: Gross inefficiency of water utilisation, which is as high as 37 percent, is one the prime cause of poor agriculture output that also afflicts farmers by entrapping them into vicious debt cycle.

This was observed by the agro-experts attending a seminar on 'Role of agriculture in reducing poverty in Pakistan' arranged by the International Food Policy Research Institute (Washington) and Beaconhouse National University (BNU) the.

"The irrigation efficiency is only 37 percent in Pakistan that ultimately brings instability to the agriculture sector and fluctuate the output," Dr Akmal Hussain, an eminent economist said adding that "the small farmers ultimately go into debt

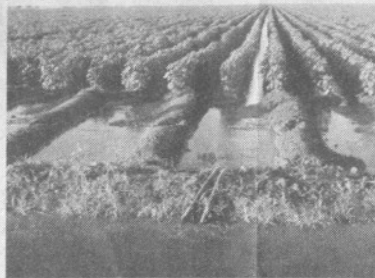
by the end of the day."

Mentioning about the structural constraints in poverty reduction in agriculture sector, Dr Akmal said the problems like absence of soil testing stations, use of overage seeds and minimum land ownership of small farmers were major constraints in the growth of sector.

He also stressed the need of building up new institutions with a task to educate the farmers about farming, as the illiterate farmers waste 63 percent of irrigation water due to poor irrigation efficiency.

According to him, the average age of seeds used in Pakistan is 11 years against seven years in the world.

Dr Husain maintained that 65 percent of the rural population in Southern Punjab was sick due to non-availability of clean



water. According to him, the initiatives like low mark up loans, consumer products and easy access to loans could not bring changes into the rural life and it requires a shift in the policy from privileged farmers to the poor-farmers one.

Similarly, he said, the survey shows

that 50 percent of rural household are landless whereas 25 percent cultivate land as tenants. "The ownership of land by the tenants is must for poverty reduction in the country," he said.

He also pointed out the asymmetric marketing as one of the major source of poverty increase in rural areas.

Advisor to Prime Minister on Finance Dr Salman Shah, in his address said the water security and off-farm activities are one of the big challenges for the policy makers to check the rising trend of poverty, particularly in South Punjab. He, however, held the number of sick people in rural areas, which was quoted as "unacceptable".

"If we have sustained 8 percent GDP growth, a growth in the human resource is must for it," he said and added: "As per the

survey, 65 percent of rural population is sick, which is unacceptable."

Another expert in his address said that less agriculture and more off-farm activities has resulted into lesser poverty in the North Punjab comparing with the South Punjab where the situation is vice versa but the poverty is on rise. "The green revolution in South Punjab has failed to change the life of poor farmers comparing to the off-farm activities in the North," the agro-expert added.

However, the expert admitted to the audience that he had no peculiar study or survey to substantiate his observation.

But the Advisor to Prime Minister on Finance Dr Salman Shah took the point seriously and enlisted it to the points necessary for poverty reduction in Pakistan.