[Foqia Sadiq Khan](https://www.thenews.com.pk/writer/foqia-sadiq-khan)

August 3, 2021

**Rethinking agriculture**

The poverty of social science in Pakistan is reflected in the fact that there have been few attempts to rethink the political economy of agriculture and industry and the linked social structures in Pakistan.

Lately, some good work has been published on it. One of them is McCartney and Akbar Zaidi’s edited book, ‘New Perspectives on Pakistan’s Political Economy: State, Class, and Social Change’ (2019). Academic Muhammad Ali Jan has a good chapter in this book on re-imagining agriculture in Pakistan. We are going to base this article on Jan’s chapter.

According to the author, the landholdings’ size has declined over the decades. However, this decline needs to be seen in the provincial context due to prevalence of variations. This decline may not translate into a decline of large landowners’ power as they can not only lease land, if needed, but also make investment in the off-farm sector to keep their power intact. There has also been an increase of medium and small landholders and a ‘rural middle class’ exists now.

The landed class can no longer take their power to garner votes for granted. Citing Mohmand (2014)’s work, Jan says the landed class has to cater to the demands of their constituents to secure their votes. In other words, it is a negotiated relationship and not a top-down relationship any longer.

Jan has conducted his own fieldwork in two districts of Punjab: Toba Tek Singh and Okara. In Toba Tek Singh, there were virtually no large landowners and capitalist farmers owned between 25 to 50 acres. Whereas, in Okara, there was a continuing pattern of large landowners holding sway. Hence, there is lots of variation amongst landholdings patterns and their owners even within Punjab, to cite one example.

Jan is also not entirely convinced of Aasim Sajjad Akhtar’s idea that transporters and urban traders have risen as an alternative to the landed class. In his own fieldwork in Punjab, in one district of Okara, former non-landed “low-caste” biradaris are in agro-trading; yet in the other district Toba Tek Singh, landowners themselves invested in trading as off-farm investment.

Yet, at the same time, Jan is of the view there has been dilution in the power of large landowners and the “rural middle class” is more prominent. This often consists of erstwhile peasants who have risen through the ranks, and it has important implications for the political economy and politics at the village level.

The state is being pulled and pushed in different directions by various social groups. The demand for patronage outstrips its supply and it creates fissures in social groups and the structure of state itself. There may not be revolutionary upheaval, yet transformation is taking place in state-society relationships.

The agrarian state bureaucracy has weakened and is often not able to deliver the services to people in rural areas and this void has been filled up by the agricultural trading capital.

Jan on the one hand says landowners are able to maintain their power despite decline in landholdings, and on the other hand he also discusses the rising prominence of “rural middle class”. In other words, there are “complex and contradictory trajectories of agrarian transformation”. To sum it up, the rural elite is segmented.

These “contradictory” pulls and pushes mean that the landed class does not offer the kind of social base and hegemony that it once did and the Alavian thesis on it needs rethinking.

Those tied to landholdings have also branched off to the urban areas. By investing in their children’s education, they have joined the professional class in the urban areas and yet have a “strong presence” back in their rural bases in the district and sub-district politics.

The author elucidates that large landholdings are declining, “In Punjab…the figures are even lower than the national average, with farm area over 100 acres a mere 7 percent of total and cultivated area at 5 percent. The greatest growth has been in the small (between 5 and 12.5 acres) and marginal farmer (up to 5 acres) categories at the expense of medium (25 to 50 acres) and large farmers.”

Jan also finds it difficult to fully agree with Zaidi that Pakistan is almost urban and the agriculture is in decline all round. For example, there is continued importance of agriculture for Punjab’s economy and it shows that urbanization might not be determining the basis of crosscutting social structures and agriculture is still important in this regard.

The author further says, “Landowners may extend their political influence by capturing new political and economic networks of capital and the local (or regional) state but their base in the village remains important in providing the necessary leverage to widen their influence”. Intra-class segmentation is as important as the inter-class one.

Alavi did not accept that smaller landowners constituted a separate class because both the large and small landowners had the same interests on issues of public policy including taxation, commodities price and subsidies. Yet Jan says that a nuanced understanding is that there are “intra-class differences between large and smaller landowners”.

Jan’s work like Shandana Mohmand’s research throws new light at the negotiated settlement that is taking place along the “rural-urban continuum”. The power of the landed class has declined due to the relatively small size of landholdings and other changing socio-economic structures – yet the land is important to determine the contours of power in the rural areas. There is both inter and intra-class segmentation in the rural areas and, with the rise of new rural middle class, the rural elite is segmented.

In other words, land’s importance has relatively declined with the rise of new socio-economic forces and structures, yet it cannot be written off in determining the rural existence and power structures. These facts cannot be easily understood by urban dwellers like me unless one does fieldwork.

The writer is an Islamabad-based social scientist.

Email: fskcolumns@gmail.com