

SOCIAL  
SCIENCE  
AND  
POLICY  
BULLETIN

Winter 2011



School of Humanities,  
Social Sciences and Law  
Lahore University of Management Sciences



## Class, Caste and *Marla* Housing Scheme in Rural Punjab

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### Class and caste in Punjab

Even if the class-caste conjunction is not as important a determinant of marginalisation in Pakistan as it was in pre-independence India, there are large regions of the country where it is almost a defining characteristic of social structure. The contrast, however, with post-independence India, where the class-caste conjunction is instrumental to the design and architecture of virtually all social policy and development interventions, could not be more vivid. The divergent ideological trajectories of their respective independence movements, political parties and elites who dominated the process of decolonisation may be responsible for this difference. The myth of Pakistan's origin makes much of an assertion of a uniform and egalitarian Muslim identity united in opposition to a caste-ridden Hindu society (Jalal, 1995).

Ethnographic studies show that the class-caste conjunction is alive and active across central Punjab. Perhaps the only policy intervention in this region that directly addressed the oppression of citizens at the bottom of the class-caste hierarchy was the Punjab *Marla* Scheme—a little acknowledged and short-lived housing programme of the provincial government in the 1970s. The *Marla* Scheme left a deep, if uneven, imprint on the ground, but hardly any paper-trail. We report findings of a field-based study in Okara to highlight both the persistence of the class-caste conjunction and the impact of this scheme.

### Punjab caste demography

In order to appreciate the demographic significance of the class-caste conjunction, we refer to pre-independence population census data, in which caste was reported. Table 1 summarizes the caste composition of that part of the population of western Punjab that is thought to have remained in Pakistan. Muslim 'cultivator castes', including *Jats*, *Rajputs* and *Arains* accounted for around two-fifths of the total population. Not all of these were landowners. In fact, according to the same census, over a third of all cultivators were actually landless tenants.

**Table 1: Population distribution by caste**

	Present-day Punjab (%)	Montgomery including present-day Okara (%)
<i>Chubra</i> —all religions	1.3	1.6
<i>Mussalli</i>	3.3	5.5
Muslim <i>kammi</i>	20.6	21.3
Muslim cultivator castes	42.8	41
Others	32	30.5

Source: Authors' calculation based on Census of Punjab, 1931 (Khan, 1992)

The census classification of society into castes, particularly cultivators and non-cultivators, was buttressed by legal provisions instituted in the early part of the twentieth century. The Punjab Land Alienation Act divided rural society into 'cultivating' and 'non-cultivating' tribes for the purposes of restricting property transactions which might lead to the 'alienation' of land to non-cultivators. The institutional basis for operating this division was the 'village record' which was then, and remains today, the authentic record of property rights in rural Punjab.

The Muslim *kammis* or non-cultivator service groups

such as barbers, potters, blacksmiths, weavers and beggars comprised a fifth of the total population. A further five percent or so were recorded as *chubra* and *mussalli*, whose traditional caste occupation was described as 'sweeping'. While all three are regarded as pejorative terms now, they were used in a matter-of-fact way to describe the caste composition of the population in the 1931 census. Besides being engaged in their traditional menial and service occupations, the populations belonging to these three 'lower' caste groupings were predominantly employed as agricultural labourers who were, nevertheless, not to be counted among officially recognised 'cultivator castes'.

The traditional village record requires identification of individuals by paternity and caste, through a genealogical tree traced through the male line. The most privileged form of property right in the village is the ownership of cultivated land and corresponding shares in the uncultivated area, including the inhabited part of the village. Individuals with such rights are often referred to as the 'original owners'. Below them are those who may own cultivated land, but do not enjoy rights in the uncultivated area. There is, in addition, a category of non-owner tenants who are officially recognised as cultivators. The common feature across these villages is the maintenance of a hierarchy where genealogical lineage with the additional filter of 'cultivator' caste is invoked on a regular basis for all transactions.

### **Post-independence policy**

While independent India recognised the problem of caste-based oppression in its Constitution, in Pakistan the early debate on land reforms offered the first opportunity for addressing the class-caste conjunction that was embedded in the formal institutions of the village. The Punjab Land Alienation Act which formally divided rural society into 'cultivators' and 'non-cultivators', and in turn ensured the perpetuation of the traditional hierarchy, was repealed in Indian Punjab in the 1950s on the grounds that it was in conflict with the country's

newly adopted Constitution. The same law, however, remains in place in Pakistani Punjab, and land allotment rules in the province continue to exclude non-cultivators, including agricultural labourers, from the allotment of state-owned or acquired agricultural area. The social classifications defined in the village record remain a part of other citizen interactions with the state. Despite many high-profile reforms of the education system, the enrolment forms for government schools in Punjab require a child's caste as well as her father's 'cultivator' status in an ironic throw-back to the hierarchy formalised under colonial rule.

The then-ruling Muslim League appointed a committee to review the agrarian situation and to make recommendations for reforms. The main recommendations of this committee dealt with the conditions of tenant farmers and advocated the model of a peasant-proprietor economy. The committee also recognised that the oppression of non-cultivator service castes and agricultural labourers was far more severe than that of the landless tenants, but limited its recommendations for these classes to an extension of residential security, regulation of wages and working conditions in conjunction with other forms of protection. The provincial legislature of Punjab accepted most of the Muslim League committee's recommendations with respect to tenant cultivators when it passed a tenancy law in 1950. For the labouring service castes, the main contribution of the land reforms was to change their nomenclature from *kammis* to *mueen*. Even the relatively modest ideas about the provision of residential autonomy and security from village landowners were ignored (Naqvi, Khan & Chaudhry, 1987).

### **Punjab Marla Scheme**

It took nearly three decades and the formation of the first democratically-elected government in the 1970s before some of the recommendations of the early Muslim League committee were finally implemented. The Punjab Housing Facilities for Non-Proprietors in Rural Areas

Act, or the Punjab *Marla* Scheme in common parlance, was passed by the Punjab provincial assembly in 1975 (Punjab Government, 1975). The law initiated a programme for the allotment of property rights to 'non-proprietors' for homesteads measuring five *marla*, or just over 150 square yards, in Punjab villages. 'Non-proprietors' comprised those individuals or families who did not own any type of land anywhere in the country. In effect, this was meant to specifically target people belonging to the non-cultivator service castes and agricultural labourers.

The *Marla* Scheme law required the setting up of People's Village Committees (PVCs) to oversee the implementation of the programme. The PVCs, which were mostly made up of ruling party members, were to identify potential beneficiaries who were awarded lease titles to their plots of land. *Marla* Scheme settlements often came to be known as Bhutto colonies. The involvement of the PVCs had ensured that allotments were made to families at the lower end of the class-caste hierarchy—namely Christian *maseehi* and Muslim *shaikh* landless labourers who had been identified in the 1931 Census as *chubra* and *mussalli* respectively.

With the overthrow of the Bhutto government in 1977 the *Marla* Scheme fell into dormancy. In 1985 when the military regime decided to initiate a transfer of power to a civilian administration, the transitional government repealed the original 1975 Act and launched a new scheme called the Jinnah *Abadis* for non-proprietors, in the Rural Areas Act of 1986 (Government of Punjab, 1986). The main difference between this law and its earlier counterpart was the abolition of the PVC in favour of implementation through the land administration machinery. There were complaints that the revised scheme was being used to allot land to existing landowners or to legitimise illegal land-grabs of state-owned area by local elites.

The *Marla* Scheme remains very poorly documented. The record of implementation and beneficiaries is

available only at the local level, and there too in an *ad hoc* manner. Since the revised *Marla* Scheme under the 1986 law remains on the books at least nominally, it was reasonable to expect its documentation by the provincial government. The Office for Land Colonisation within the provincial Land Revenue department was responsible for running the scheme, maintaining records and acting as an intermediary between the provincial-level and district-level land administration. That the Jinnah *Abadis* scheme annually received around PKR two million in the provincial budget in the last three years, confirms its role in government as not much more than that of an occasional forwarding agency (Government of Punjab, 2009).

### Evidence from Okara

*Chak* 003 is a canal colony village located 17km from the Okara district headquarters. It was developed between 1920 and 1928 during British rule at the time of the excavation of the Lower Bari Doab Canal. The history of settlement in *Chak* 003 was not dissimilar to that of other canal colony villages in central Punjab. In *Chak* 003 the two major 'cultivator' clans who were allotted canal colony lands were the *Rajputs* and the *Jats*. Other landowners including *Arain*, *Bhatti* and a number of different *Jat* clans also came and settled in the village over time. Those belonging to recognised cultivator castes or tribes purchased land from the *Rajput* and *Jat* landowners. At present it is estimated that *Chak* 003 has over 1,300 households. The most numerous groups among the non-cultivator castes consist of *maseehis* and Muslim *shaikhs*, nearly all of whom work as casual labourers, farm labourers, or domestic servants.

Canal colony settlement followed a prescribed pattern for the establishment of village inhabitations. In *Chak* 003, as in other such villages, the primary residential quarter was a square-shaped village with broad dividing streets lined with individual plots. These were originally allotted to settlers roughly in proportion to their holdings

of agricultural land. The management of the inhabited area was counted among the tasks of the *lambardar*. Non-owning tenant cultivators were also accommodated in the main village settlement. Some of the fringes of the main inhabited area were set aside as *kammi abata*, the quarters of the service caste non-cultivators.

The original canal colony village is currently only one of six distinct settlements within *Chak* 003, accounting for around a quarter of the total population of the *mauza*. It is still the central location in terms of economic activity and infrastructure. Most of the powerful village owners as well as the latter-day landowners reside in the original settlement. Even so, the cultivator castes make up barely half of the population of this settlement. The bulk of the population belongs to the service castes, many of whom live in congested conditions in the traditional *kammi abata*. Nearly three-quarters of the population of *Chak* 003 reside in settlements outside the original settlement. Five new settlements have emerged since the first settlement, and there are over 80 farmhouses around the *mauza* with a combined population of around 400 households. All of these farmhouses are on privately owned agricultural land.

The most dramatic change in terms of housing in *Chak* 003 occurred in the early 1970s with the introduction of the *Marla* Scheme. Known locally as the Tilla Bhutto Scheme (TBS), this settlement is located one and a half kilometers away from the original settlement. Approximately 250 Muslim *shaikhs* and *maseehis* families were allotted five *marla* plots of land with title of ownership. A majority of the targeted beneficiaries were Muslim *shaikhs* and Christians who lived with their landlord employers, for whom they worked as farm and domestic labourers. The allottees of the TBS and their former employers recall the disruption caused to the landlords' economy by the sudden departure of their labourers.

The last 20 years had seen an increasing trend on the part of local landowners to establish farmhouses on

their agricultural holdings. There were over 80 farmhouses scattered across the 1800 acres of *Chak* 003. The farmhouses were set up to partly overcome the lack of space inside the original settlement, as the traditional landlord house in the village was supposed to accommodate livestock as well as farm and domestic servants, who were mostly from *maseehi* and Muslim *shaikh* families. After the loss of a majority of these families to TBS in the early 1970s, the landowners were able to acquire new farm and domestic servants from other villages.

Nearly all of the 400 or so residents of farmhouses are Muslim *shaikh*, and the remainder are *maseehi*. Men, women and children of these families are always at the beck and call of their employers. The salaries for male servants range between PKR 3000-4000 monthly. This works out to around half the amount that an employer would have to pay if he were to hire from the casual labour market. In addition to specific duties, many unspecified tasks are expected to be performed by family members without additional pay. Family members are not allowed to take up work with other employers. They can work for extra pay with the employer well below the going wage rate. While the daily wage rate is around PKR 250-300, family members of servants can expect to get only about PKR 100-120 a day from the landowner. Although contracts are only nominally for a year corresponding to the annual agricultural cycle, most farm servants and their dependents have been with the same employer for many years.

A loan or an advance is an essential part of this arrangement. The amount of the loan varies between PKR 30,000-70,000. In many cases parents of present-day workers were also indebted servants of the same landowner. The annual cycle of the employment contract simply means that a servant is free to negotiate with a new employer at the end of a crop cycle, but not in the middle of it. When landowners hire new servants they must compensate the previous employer for any outstanding debt, which then gets transferred to the

new employer. For newly hired workers, employers demand a personal guarantee from a trusted individual who can ensure that the servant will not abscond without repaying the debt. Landowners have strong networks across district and province, and indeed even beyond, and are able to eventually track down absconding servants.

Most of the farm servant families living on the farmhouses in *Chak* 003 had always been servants of landowners for as long as they could recall. Many of them were 'acquired' by *Chak* 003 landowners from other masters, with the neighbouring village of *Chak* 004 frequently mentioned as the place of origin. It was reported that the owners of that village had obstructed the establishment of a *Marla* Scheme settlement. In contrast to the farmhouse residents, nearly all inhabitants of the two *Marla* Scheme settlements in *Chak* 003 are either *maseebi* or Muslim *shaikh*. None of them own any agricultural land, and most work as casual labourers on local farms. None work as farm servants or bonded labourers anywhere.

### Conclusion

This article has shown that the class-caste conjunction remains active in at least some parts of contemporary rural Punjab. The region with its strong resource base, good connections with markets, and well-developed infrastructure also retains a traditional hierarchy in social and economic relations, which has survived significant political and economic changes. Successive reforms failed to address the resulting exclusions because they retained and even endorsed the key institutions such as the village record, genealogy, and a hierarchy of privileges.

The class-caste conjunction and the resulting social hierarchy become visible through an analysis of actual, traditional and contemporary arrangements concerning access to homestead land in certain developed villages of the region. At the lower end of the class-caste hierarchy are labourer castes whose traditional occupations are considered 'unclean'. The Punjab *Marla* Scheme, the

one intervention that sought to address the class-caste hierarchy, despite having a demonstrable impact, was put to rest prematurely, without any attempt at documentation or impact analysis.

A number of dimensions of vulnerability and social exclusion as measured along axes of asset ownership, gender, employment, health, region and ethnicity find explicit expression in public discourse, even if acknowledgement is not always backed with action. The non-acknowledgement of the class-caste conjunction in public discourse, however, is a major blind spot in the very framing of the debate on poverty, social protection and social policy in general. The more strident statements of Pakistani nationalism, particularly those which posit a supposedly egalitarian Muslim community in opposition to a hierarchical Hindu one, have simply provided alibis for the perpetuation of some of the worst forms of class-caste discrimination against large segments of the Pakistani citizenry.

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