

DEBT BONDAGE OF AGRICULTURE WORKERS IN THE WAKE OF FLOODS, 2011 SINDH

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Abstract

As evident in all natural disasters in the world, socially vulnerable segment of society bears most losses caused by the calamities. For not being able to face the severity of the situation people like agriculture workers were the prime victims of rain followed by floods 2011 in Sindh province of Pakistan. The floods caused major losses to infrastructure of health, education and communication in lower part of Sindh where majority of the people are agriculture workers. Most of the victims had no movable valuables, which could have been exchanged for livelihood in rain-flood emergency. Those who had some cattle and other pets could not take with them because the only thing they could save was their family members' lives. That resulted on their sole dependence on government and aid agencies/NGOs for food and temporary shelter. These floods were a challenge for the government and nation as whole to gauge our capability and preparedness whether we were able to face the disasters or not. The following article is based on our visits and observation of flood-affected areas. Focus has been given to Mirpurkhas district for its agriculture importance in Sindh.

Keywords: *Floods, Debt bondage, Agriculture, Workers, Social vulnerability*

Introduction:

One month prolonged torrential monsoon rains caused severe flooding in Pakistan from mid-August to mid-September this year. The Sindh Province was severely hit by these rains and floods. Regarding the monsoon season, there were forecast predictions for the year 2011 in which it was said that there would be 10% below normal rains in Sindh and the southern parts of the country. However, the districts of southern Sindh were severely affected by heavy rains on August 10. The rains also affected the northern regions of the province, the adjoining areas of south Punjab and northeastern Balochistan. The central and southern districts of Sindh were the worst affected (www.iom.int).

The floodwaters devastated villages, towns and washed away access routes. It downed power communications lines, and inflicted major damage to buildings. Many key roads and major bridges were damaged. The prevailing socio-economic conditions along with flood have worsened the living conditions of women, men, boys and girls residing in these districts. Vulnerable people in general are potentially experiencing a higher risk of disease and socio-economic disruption in addition to the challenges of limited access and mobility.

These rains caused widespread breaches in the agricultural and saline water canals, particularly in the Left Bank Outfall Drain, which exacerbated flood impact including others in Sanghar, Mirpurkhas and Tando Mohammad Khan districts.

Outflow of the draining floodwater is compromised due to poor infrastructure and lack of maintenance of the drainage routes. Floodwaters are likely to stagnate in most of the affected regions for the foreseeable future (www.guardian.co.uk). These areas of Sindh even highlight a broader truth: that Sindh, a ragged province where poor peasants toil under powerful landlords and majority of peasants and brick kiln workers remain in debt bondage, has long had some of the worst poverty levels in South Asia (www.humanrights.asia). Additional to the current flooding, the areas in rural Sindh present an extremely grim picture regarding the access to basic services and the rights of the citizens. If we look at the development, we find wide disparities between rural and urban Sindh. The level of human development in rural Sindh is worse than in some of the Sub-Saharan African countries. Two out of every five of the citizens of rural Sindh live below the poverty line (www.iom.int).

Situation of the people who have been forced to leave their homes have sought refuge on higher ground, along roadsides and on bunds, while others are housed in public shelters. Access to safe drinking water and health services are very difficult. With an increasing number of people uprooted as a consequence of the situation, ensuring emergency shelter and food for the population is critical. According to National Disaster Management Authority (NDMA) eleven districts of southern Sindh have been badly affected by this year prolong monsoon rain. At least 8.188 million populations have been affected that caused 392 deaths. Besides, 746 persons were injured and 1.5 houses were damaged. Some 694,586 people had to live in different 3,305 makeshift camps established by government and other aid agencies. Besides, there were thousands uprooted families who had to live under open sky with very limited eatables (www.ndma.gov.pk).

Areas and their connection with bondage:

Pakistan is the world's sixth most populous country with an estimated population of 177.1 million. According to recent estimates, 63 per cent of Pakistan's population resides in rural areas. Agriculture constitutes the largest sector of Pakistan's economy. This sector provides bread and butter to the majority of the population. Large number of people is directly or indirectly dependent on this sector. It contributes about 24 percent of Gross Domestic Product (GDP). It accounts for the half of the employed labour force and it is also the largest source of foreign exchange earnings.

Sindh is the second most thickly inhabited province of Pakistan where the bulk of population lives in the countryside with agriculture as their main source of living. The province of Sindh employs 13.46 million people. It has 7.74 million rural and 5.72 urban workforces. But for the majority, working arrangements in agriculture—wage work,

tenant farming, share cropping --are exploitative and/or yield little earnings. The households cannot survive on agricultural income alone and the members supplement income through non-farm manual labour or other activities.

Patterns of Agriculture Employment:

The employment in agriculture is mostly through sharecropping (50-50% and 25-75%) contract, followed by daily wages both on verbal agreements. This contention suggests that sharecropping system is full of faults and provides an easy room for exploitation of Haris. Since majority of Haris in Pakistan are illiterate and socially weak, there is hardly any concept of proper record keeping. This kind of potential and basic vulnerabilities further push Haris to the spiral of marginalization and bondage where they have to seek loans (Peshgi) from landlords who then keep them enslaved for generations. The menace of bonded labour is directly proportional to the feudalism, which took strong roots in Pakistan after division of India in 1947.

The landed aristocracy which had got huge chunks of lands from British as reward of services they had extended to them to rule the people of the Sub-Continent, now with the nexus of bureaucracy and military became most powerful lot. They started employing landless people as their *Haris*, who as mentioned above have been at bay from basic social facilities like education and have subsequently been victims of bondage.

Land Holdings in Sindh

Sindh has been characterized with big land holdings in the entire region resulting in maximizing the power base of landed elite and the deprivation and exploitation of rural souls who are mainly associated with agriculture. The unequivocal distribution of land in Sindh has continued for more than past 60 years. Indicated in a report, 'Social Development in Pakistan; Annual Review 2004' which says at the time of inception in Sindh eight per cent of land owners owned 55 per cent of total farm land. Moreover, currently among other provinces, Sindh has the highest incidence of absolute landlessness, with 26 per cent or two million households have no land, while 26 per cent of 700,000 household possess the lowest share in land.

Agriculture Bonded Labour Prone Areas in Sindh:

Districts of Sangahr, Mirpur Khas, Umer Kot and Tharparkar have been accredited as the most bonded labour prone districts in Sindh. In agriculture, the bonded labour is mostly concentrated in lower areas of Sindh. The menace is wide spread in Thaparkar, Umerkot, Mirpur Khas, Sanghar, Badin and Hyderabad. These districts, which fall under the rural divide in Sindh, majority of people in these districts, are connected with agriculture. The research carried out by the Asian Development Bank for the Government of Sindh, state that there are 1.7 million landless agricultural workers (haris) and sharecroppers in five

districts of Sindh Province (Thatta, Dadu, Badin, Mirpurkhas and Umerkot). The report notes that most of these people are in debt bondage (Zulfiqar Shah, 2008)

Impact of 2011 Monsoon Rains and Floods on Agriculture Bonded Laborers:

The Monsoon rains of this season (2011) proved to be worst calamity in last couple of decades in the history of Sindh. It was only last year (2010) that one of worst floods of Pakistan's history affected Sindh the most by destroying infrastructure, wiping out standing crops of worth billions of rupees, demolishing homesteads of the rural people entirely, causing death of hundreds of people and displacing more than 7 million people across the Province. This year's rains followed by floods have affected more than 8 million people in lower districts of Sindh.

Mirpur Khas

Mirpur Khas district with an area of 2.925 Sq, kilometers and with the population of 906 thousand according the 1998 population census. Mirpur Khas is one of the fertile districts of Sindh where majority of the people are linked with agriculture. As the district is rich in growing cotton and oil seeds so is in the prevalence of bonded labour and that two in agriculture, which is backbone of district's economy. The practice of bondage is rampant in the district, says, Majeed Sheikh a small farmer living near Mirpurkhas city. The floods that swept across vast tracts of land also played a part in exposing the depth of existing poverty and deprivation in Sindh. The powerful feudal families, linked with the political and bureaucratic elite, protected their own interests at the cost of ordinary villagers. Feudal lords are accused for diversion of floodwater or the breach of overflowing dams to protect their own land. This has been well documented. The surveys conducted on the flood-affected people show that Pakistan's feudal system works against people, even in times, when there is no natural disaster.

Peasants in flood-affected areas are working on land they do not own, giving between half and two-thirds of their crops to landlords. These floods have exposed extreme cases of debt bondage where landlords threatened the displaced peasants to not to leave the area unless their debt is repaid. This is not new but part of practice in parts of Sindh for years not known. The poor peasants and landless agricultural workers have been exploited in many ways. They take loan from landowners and offer it to pay back by their work. After they take loan, they end up tied to the land. In this way, the whole families end up in this type of debt bondage. Thus, this system turns the peasants into an absolute poverty (Zulfiqar Shah, 2005).

Floods, Inflation and Food Insecurity

A provincial government report based on a survey conducted with UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) support has revealed a grave nutritional crisis in Sindh. According to UNICEF the women and children of Sindh have suffered like this for thousands of years due to the feudal system in the province, and of course the mother's health affects the child who has

performed life-saving operations in the most primitive conditions across flood-hit parts of Sindh. These floods have multiplied the food security problems in these areas and most victims are again women and children.

Many renowned economists are afraid that due to the poor food production, inflation will keep on soaring. They expect that in the coming months inflation will continuously rise. Due to constant increase in the prices of essential food items, the low-income groups would be badly affected. They fear that the frequent hikes in petro-based products would further aggravate the situation. The overwhelming loss of domestic animals, crop lands, and extensive damage to the infrastructure, are likely to have long-term negative effects on food security and economic performance. Based on last years' experience, some medium and long-term consequences of flooding can be projected as lost livelihoods for farmers. Because they could not plant next season's crop. And a diminished food supply is the key concern (www.csmonitor.com).

Already threatened by famine and disease, the plight of the flood-affected is being exacerbated by the rising prices of food items. As evident everywhere in the world, risk of price hike of basic food commodities is always inherent after any disaster. Coupled by mismanagement and carelessness during and after flood response, government agencies at district level could not help the needy people at time and left them vulnerable to the exploiters. That resulted with harsher terms of employments from the local landlords with less wages and financial support (www.socialistpakistan.org).

Floods raised important Questions

The floods in Sindh have exposed another long standing issue in agriculture sector that is the legal aspect. As agriculture sector in Sindh is largely unregulated and no national or international laws are placed. Only one provincial law, Sindh Tenancy Act 1950, is applicable to agriculture sector. But unfortunately this law needs some amendments given the introduction of technology used in cultivation at one place and is also not implemented in letter and spirit. Passed 61 years ago this law defines equal share of peasant and land owner with giving the peasant right to cultivate land. This law also provides with the registration of peasants by revenue department of Sindh so as to regulate the relationship among peasants and kiln workers. Civil society organizations have been asking the government of Sindh to revise Sindh Tenancy Act 1950 continually. In fact, after a long march of peasants in April 2009 an amendment bill draft was also submitted to the Sindh Assembly legislators by the civil society organizations but no tangible results have come out yet.

After the floods when thousands of peasants were displaced with their belongings destroyed, government is announcing subsidies to agriculture sector but the beneficiaries are landlords not peasants. Because no regulation is in place and landlords are not compelled to share the subsidies provided by the government with peasants so it's more concerning that peasants are left more vulnerable to the exploitation of landlords. This

was reflected in our group discussions with peasants in Mirpurkhas who cried that the landlords were not willing to waive off their loans and asking the peasants to bear the losses caused by floods.

Advocate Bhagwandas Bheel, an activist and member of Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network, said that landlords have lodged FIRs on those peasants who did not want to go back and work on same lands. In one of these cases in Umerkot, three peasants are in lock-up.

With above facts in place and as evident in disasters all over the world, women and children are the most victims of these floods in Sindh. Already living under poverty line women and children of peasants have borne worse consequences of these floods right from flooding, evacuation, camping and food and non-food items distribution by state and non-state actors in camps or where these peasants have sort a good place to camp. In post floods, period weaker sections of society face more difficulties and this was evident when we observed that only women were bringing drinking water for whole family. If we compare with men health and clothing then also women were in bad condition. During our visit to flooded areas, we observed that women had more problems of privacy or in regard with special needs in daily life. At least 3 million children are at risk of malnutrition and disease, according to Save the Children. There is little realization that Sindh has the worst rates of maternal and child under nutrition in the country as exemplified by the nutrition surveys undertaken during the floods last year and confirmed by the recently concluded national nutrition survey. The current floods have just compounded a chronic emergency and underscored the importance of large-scale preventive strategies.

Addition to that, aid and foodstuff distribution has been very poorly managed. A society like rural Sindh divided on ethnic, religious, political and caste lines needs a clear structural and administrative set up to deal with post disastrous relief and rehabilitation activities. But in Sindh province National Disaster Management Authority and its provincial and district level units have not been able to provide equal relief to most vulnerable groups like minorities and bonded labourers. This was also seen when we met villagers of taluka Shah Karim of district Tando Mohammad Khan where flood victims told that they had not been provided any relief/food item because government gave trucks loaded with food and medicines to its party's local leaders and these leaders provided aid to only their voters.

It is our contention that the massive displacement and disruption of these two groups of workers as a result of floods would turn to push them further to spiral of bondage when they will have no option but to take new loans and fall victim to the debt-bondage which they could never be able to re-pay. Therefore, the debt would give birth to the new generation of bonded labour in the areas. In rural Sindh, where, through a combination of wealth and religious standing, landlord power is most pronounced, thousands of laborers

remain in bonded labor for debts accrued by their forefathers, and are confined to their villages to carry out hard labor till their death.

Conclusion

In conclusion we want to give the recommendations suggested by victims of floods of 2011 as following; first, the government has announced to waive off the agricultural loans of landlords, it should also be announce publically by the government that all loans/advances taken by the peasants must be waived off by the landlords. Second, Government should also announce that the kiln owners must waive off debt taken by kiln workers. Third, a thorough and full fledged research must be conducted covering all districts of flood affected in Sindh so as to gauge the extent of social vulnerability of workers in general and peasants and kiln workers in particular. Forth, special focus should be given to peasants and brick kiln workers while announcing the relief and rehabilitation programmes. Fifth, marginal groups like Hindu *Dalits* must be given priority while announcing and implementing relief and rehabilitation plans. Sixth, it should be make sure that in post-flood time landlords and brick kiln owners must not exploit the economic and social vulnerability of these marginalized groups i.e. poor peasants and brick kiln workers. Seventh, in post-flood time government agencies must make it sure that landlords and brick kiln owners should pay justly to peasants and brick kiln workers. Eighth, short term and long term livelihood should be arranged for most vulnerable groups in affected areas so as to bar the economical vulnerability of poor peasants and brick kiln workers. Ninth, coordination mechanism for relief and rehabilitation should be streamline in between the different agencies working in flood-affected areas so as to truly reach the poor peasants and brick kiln workers. Tenth, government should revise the Minimum Wage of brick kiln workers to the level where they can live with dignity. Eleventh, advocacy in property rights & legal advice and sharing information on retrieval of the legal documents may be provided by the government and non-government organizations to all vulnerable groups including women. The concerned government officials may also be sensitized to provide these services.

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