
What Do We Resist When We Resist? Peasants' Land Rights Movement and the Emergence of New Social Life in Pakistani Punjab

by Muhammad Qasim

How can we interpret the peasants' infamous chant of "ownership or death"? Does it merely refer to the ownership of agricultural land, or does it encompass something more profound? Are the peasants willing to choose death solely due to the denial of agricultural land, or is it a deeper denial for which they are prepared to sacrifice their lives? The central argument of this essay is that the peasants' struggles regarding agricultural land extend beyond resisting perceived eviction attempts. Instead, these struggles aim to achieve or safeguard the ownership of the peasants' collective social life within their village community. This fundamental aspect of the peasants' land rights movement is often overlooked or superficially examined in the literature on peasants' resistance.

As Ferguson (2013) argues, the land question is often reduced to an agrarian question in the literature, disregarding the multifaceted role that land plays in the social fabric of a village community. Agricultural usage of



land is just one aspect among many. Therefore, instead of focusing solely on the forms of peasants' resistance, whether they are open/organized or everyday/hidden, this research delves into the content of the peasants' resistance. By examining the political thought and actions of villagers and exploring the relationship between political life in rural communities and the larger political systems they are part of, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of peasants' politics and resistance (Kerkvliet & Benedict, 2013).

Based on 4 months of ethnographic fieldwork and my personal involvement in political activism and solidarity with the peasants' resistance, this essay examines the resistance of peasants in the villages of Okara district in Pakistani Punjab. These peasants raised the slogan "Ownership or Death" (Malki ya Mout) in opposition to military landlordism. It is a unique form of landlordism (Sajjad, 2006) and refers to the control of agricultural land in Okara villages by the Pakistani military under the Okara Military



Farms authority (OMFs). Additionally, these villages are situated on land originally developed as part of the British canal colonies project, a massive infrastructural project (Rizvi, 2019; Ali, 1988) that resulted in significant social engineering of Punjabi society (Ali, 1988) and the consolidation of military intervention in postcolonial Pakistan's politics, economics, and society (Yong, 2005; Alavi, 1973).

In Okara villages, military-landlordism is extended beyond the appropriation of the villages' economy through control of agricultural land; it also encompassed the control of villagers' social life. Therefore, the peasants' resistance is not solely focused on the ownership of agricultural land but also on the collective ownership of their social life. These dimensions of peasants' domination and struggle have received limited exploration and discussion in the existing literature on the peasants' resistance, which I aim to explore in detail.

The struggles of the peasantry to reclaim ownership of their collective social life, rooted in the colonial formation of their villages and the subjugation of their social existence under the neocolonial state of Pakistan, can be better understood through the framework of the four principles of



liberation psychology: “recovering historical memory,” which emphasizes understanding the true history of oppression based on lived experiences and cultural heritage; “deideologizing everyday experiences,” where oppressed people employ critical consciousness to challenge imposed realities; “virtues of the people,” referring to the ability of oppressed people to sacrifice for the collective good and their belief in the capacity to change the world; and “praxis,” which involves collective action by oppressed people to liberate their colonized social existence (Comas-Diaz & Rivera, 2020, pp. 41–47)

The peasants of Okara district, under their collective organization known as Anjumen Muzareena Punjab (AMP), have successfully resisted military eviction attempts and a unilaterally introduced change in the land tenure agreement from Batiee (sharecropping system) to Patadari (rent-in-cash system) since 2000. Interestingly, the peasants’ resistance erupted in post-colonial Pakistan in response to military-landlordism in the villages following the military coup by Pervez Musharraf in 1999. This coup toppled the democratically elected Federal Government of Pakistan Muslim League without encountering any resistance (Rizvi, 2019).¹ Motivated by

¹ For Rizvi (2019), the emergence of the peasants’ movement in *Okara*, Punjab, immediately following the military coup in 1999 raises intriguing questions regarding the state-society relations in Pakistan.

the principles of neoliberal economic reforms, the military regime made an effort to replace the long-standing sharecropping system (Rizvi, 2017, 2019) with a new rent-in-cash system as a means to enhance land revenue. However, the peasants regarded this new system with great suspicion, as it proposed to alter their status from permanent tenants, who enjoyed protection from eviction, to tenants at will, who could be expelled from the land at any time. The military's attempt to impose the rent-in-cash system sparked the peasants' resistance at OMFs. Not only did the peasants reject the newly imposed rent-in-cash system, but they also refused to cultivate the land under the century-old sharecropping system.

The peasants successfully asserted their complete ownership of the land. While both academic scholarship and the understanding of popular activists view this as the primary goal and achievement of the peasants' resistance, this chapter contends that their resistance and accomplishments extend beyond mere land ownership and the refusal to pay rent to landlords. Under the banner of their political organization, Anjuman Muzareen Punjab, the peasants' political resistance against the ownership of agricultural land has fostered a culture of resistance that has emancipated the peasants' social lives from the grips of military landlordism. Consequently, it suggests that existing scholarship on this movement has overlooked and failed to consider the oppressed social conditions experienced by the peasants prior to the emergence of their movement.

In his work on AMP, Mubashir Rizvi (2017, 2019) delves into the question of how tenants framed their struggle for land rights against the Pakistani military. According to Rizvi, the tenants achieved success in resisting the powerful military institution of the Pakistani state by invoking the logic of land rights grounded in the moral economy of subsistence. Rizvi's framework for comprehending the peasants' land rights struggles is centered around the concept of the moral economy. Shozab Raza (2020) studied AMP struggles in the context of global land-grabbing literature and mafia bosses of South Asia. He explores the afterlife of the AMP movement and shows that land-grabbing attempts from the superordinate entities in the form of state and corporation do not only give birth to accumulation

It is perplexing how the peasants managed to resist and construct a potent counterhegemonic discourse against the Pakistani military, an immensely powerful institution with Punjab as its main spatial ideological stronghold. The paradox lies in the fact that while the military exhibited enough power to overthrow the democratically elected government without encountering any opposition, it failed to suppress the resistance put forth by the peasants.



from above but also accumulation from below. As many leaders of AMP garnered immense economic and social capital through AMP struggles owing to their leadership roles in the peasants' organization. The top-tier leadership of AMP acts now both like peasants' militant and mafia bosses. Asim Sajjad (2006), in his study of AMP, makes a point that the peasants' struggle over land rights is a struggle for their livelihood and culture, and the peasants' access to the land is a condition of their "very existence itself." Sajjad did not explore this dimension of the struggle further and reverted to the usual debates of the scholarships on the peasants, whether peasants' class has consciousness, whether are they revolutionary, how peasantry is internally differentiated, and how the AMP tenants are different from the typical peasantry discussed in the Marxists literature because AMP tenants are the tenants of a state institution. All three studies on AMP are situated on the three different scholarly traditions of peasants' studies: the



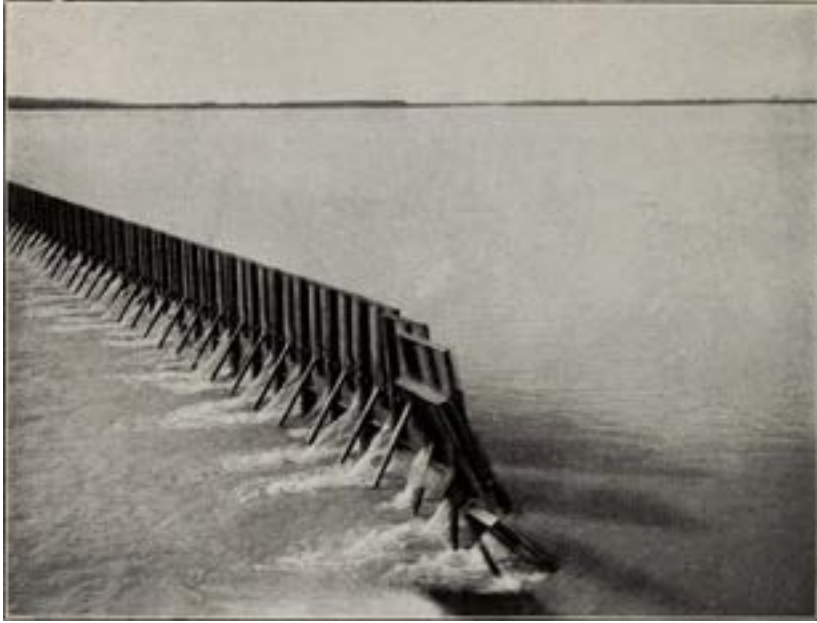
moral economy approach, global land-grabbing literature, and Marxist scholarship. All three studies though have very different focuses and points of contentions nevertheless have one fundamental agreement that the peasants' resistance and struggles are for the ownership of their agricultural land. Therefore, these studies fail to talk about those acts of resistance of AMP struggles that are aimed at decolonizing the peasants' social life.

In contrast to the above studies, through the abovementioned framework of liberation psychology, this chapter explains that both before and after the eruption of peasants' resistance against military landlordism, the nature of social and political life in the peasants' villages is very different from the social lives of other villages of Punjab. Peasants' social life under the military-landlordism was a life that was colonized. There was social and cultural apartheid in practice in the peasants' villages. Similarly, the social life of the peasants after the emergence of their successful resistance is very distinct compared to other villages of Punjab that never lived under military landlordism. The social life after the peasants' movement in the villages is politically charged and socially self-engineered. The peasants' culture of resistance, which this chapter would talk about at length in the coming sections, consists of a repertoire of radical actions which ranges from typical non/confrontational acts such as roadblocks, sit-ins, rallies,



and skirmishes with law enforcement authorities and symbolic acts of resistance such as poetry, jokes, slogans, slang, anecdotes of resistance and stories of suffering and subjugation, etc. and social- ontological acts of resistance that is taking charge of their own collective social life by building paved houses, mosques, graveyard, schools, playground, cultivating, and distributing the agricultural land, destroying the symbols and practices of domination. This paper tries to explore these novel forms of the social lives of the villages with the peasants' culture of resistance to draw insights on how peace is possible in the Global South that is delinked from its colonial past and neocolonial present alike.

Barbalet contends relations of power, in particular, can be completely comprehended only when the social context is specified. The significance of the acts of resistance can only be understood when the social characteristics and social location of the agents are fully evident in the power relations (Barbalet 1985). The struggle of AMP if studied in an accurate historical and political context would shed light on aspects of domination (colonized social life) and resistance (culture of resistance that aims to liberate the social life) that have evaded the scholarly attention of the researchers in



the field. To understand the peasants' struggle, this ethnographic study aims to explore British colonialism's violent state-making processes and their continuation and sustenance in post-colonial Pakistan, and the new possibilities of liberated and decolonial social life in which the people are the active collective agents to reengineer their social life from a humanist perspective. The research will delve into the historical context by drawing upon secondary literature, conducting in-depth interviews with peasants, and gathering data through participant observation and my own political activism within the movement. The following key historical aspects will be encompassed:

- i Construction of canal networks in eastern Punjab by British colonialism
- ii The settlement of the peasants' villages on canal colonies land, resultant social engineering of Punjabi society under the British colonialism



ii Consolidation of state landlordism and the military power in postcolonial Pakistan

Within this contextual framework, the study will discuss the peasants' culture of resistance, contributing to the exploration of a grassroots perspective on the concept of peace.

Colonization of Peasants' Social Life

Recovering Historical Memory

The history of the peasants' movement is intertwined with the construction of canal networks by the British Raj during the early twentieth century. The establishment of canal colonies in Western Punjab, initiated in 1885 and

completed in 1913, triggered significant migration from the eastern part of the province and brought about substantial economic development in the region. However, the process of land distribution among Punjabis was not driven by economic development considerations; instead, it favored feudal lords and tribal leaders who held political and social control over their respective areas. These individuals were recognized as the “martial races” of India by the British due to their substantial contribution to the British Indian Army (Ali, 1987, p. 112; 1988, pp. 110–111; Yong, 2005, pp. 79–81). The process of land distribution was very uneven and paternalistic under the aegis of British authorities that increased the polarization between rich and poor to the extent that Ali has called it the “development of underdevelopment”²

Apart from general land grants to migrants from East Punjab and pastoral tribes, the British government allocated a significant amount of agricultural land to the British Indian Military for cavalry horse runs and fodder production for military animals (Ali, 1988). Following the partition of India in 1947, this land, initially granted to the British Indian Military, was inherited by the Pakistan army. Consequently, the largest landowner in Punjab is not a feudal landlord but the military institution, which currently possesses approximately 68,000 acres of agricultural land. District Okara, the epicenter of the peasants’ resistance, is located within this region of Punjab where the military holds de facto ownership of extensive agricultural farms known as Military Farms Okara. The presence of distinct forms of landlordism, both British and Pakistani military, before and after the partition of India has given rise to a unique social fabric in the villages of Okara, setting them apart from other villages in Punjab in various aspects. As Asim Sajjad highlights, the sociological dynamics of social life under military landlordism differ from the impoverished peasantry depicted in many Marxist studies (Sajjad, 2006, p. 479). The British distribution of land grants in canal colonies engendered two types of feudalism in Pakistan, which directly inherited these colonies: “feudal landlordism” and “institutional landlordism.” Gaining an understanding of the distinct social conditions experienced by the peasantry under the institutional landlordism of the military will aid in comprehending the subjugation of peasants and

2 See Ali, Imran. (1987). *Malign Growth? Agricultural Colonization and the Roots of Backwardness in Punjab*, for more debate on canal colonies and the roots of backwardness in Pakistani Punjab.



shed light on the nature of their resistance against military landlords and land grabbing.

The district of Okara, which has been the epicenter of the peasants' movement against the Pakistan military since 2000, is situated 134 kilometers away from the provincial capital, Lahore, along the national highway and the Lahore-Karachi railway line. In Okara, the Pakistani military inherited a total of 17,000 acres of agricultural land from its British predecessors. Out of this land, 12,000 acres have been occupied by the peasants since the year 2000.

Following Pakistan's last military coup against the democratically elected government, the peasants of Okara established an organization called Anjumen Muzareena Punjab in the year 2000. The formation of AMP aimed to resist the military landlords' attempt to change the land contract from sharecropping to a rent-in- cash system. The tenants perceived this new contract as an effort by the military to permanently expropriate them from their land and village. Their suspicions were confirmed by incidents of actual eviction attempts by the military and local civil land authorities like the patwari (land record officer) when the new contract was announced. Instead of immediately evicting the tenants from their agricultural land, the

military introduced the new contract that downgraded the peasants' status from permanent tenants connected to the land through labor, cultivation, and settlement to mere leaseholders who would be required to vacate the land once the lease expired or if they failed to pay the rent.

This form of land grabbing involved not only denying the peasants' access to their agricultural land and the natural resources associated with it but also threatened to dispossess them from their villages. It reflected conflicting views on the relationship with the land, with the military-landlord perceiving it as an economic asset to maximize profit, while the tenants viewed it as an attempt to evict them not just from their agricultural land but also from their villages.

This unique form of landlordism not only exerted control over the social life of the villages before the movement but also posed a threat of dispossession from the villages during the land-grabbing attempt. Therefore, I contend that the resulting peasants' resistance against these land-grabbing attempts goes beyond stalling capital accumulation by denying rent and refusing to sign the new contract system with the landlord.



Peasants' sit in before Punjab Assembly Hall for the ownership rights of agricultural land. 25th November 2014. Participants' faces are blurred to protect their identity. (Source: Author's photos)



As we lay hungry and naked, GHQ (General Headquarters Pakistan Military) stole and left us disrobed. (Peasants' chant)

The slogan coined by the peasants' resistance movement under the AMP banner vividly portrays the hardships endured by the peasants due to direct military intervention in their villages. During my interactions with the tenants in their villages and at their political rallies, their discussions about the movement consistently revolved around their experiences under military control. Each interviewee emphasized the oppressive and marginalized nature of their lives under military domination, seeking to justify and establish a moral basis for their right to resist the army. The aforementioned slogan sheds light on two significant aspects of the peasants' lives prior to the emergence of the AMP movement. Firstly, it highlights the economic marginalization faced by the peasants, as the military was involved in appropriating the surplus generated by the village economy. Secondly, it explains the loss of self-respect and a loss of social identity as members of a village community. In addition to economic exploitation,

under military domination, peasants were also suffering from an ontological crisis. As Scott very rightly observed in peasants' communities, poverty is not a simple matter of shortage of food and cash but it includes a threat to peasants' modest standing in a village community too (Scott, 1985, p. 236). In the same way, the peasants of OMFs understand their marginalization both in terms of economic and social exploitation under complete servitude of military landlordism. Therefore, the question of land possession, for the tenants, is a prism through which they evaluate the relationship between property and propriety, servitude and freedom, and state and society (Rizvi, 2019). The possession of agricultural land is not only a material security to tenants in terms of food and shelter but also conforms to their modest position in a village community; without it tenants cannot stand to a normative life in a village.

Anwar³ is a peasant activist of AMP. He has written several poems that articulate the peasants' social life under military domination. Two of his poems lament the military oppression in the following ways:

Poem 1

“This land of ours, this nation of ours”
These are all lies, oh friends of ours!

This land of the lords, of the men in khaki and boots.
Whose bodies are hidden under the façade of medals and metal loops. Somebody should these peasants ask, empty stomach and forced to fast, How long has it been since their families starve?

“This land of ours, this nation of ours”
These are all lies, oh friends of ours!” (Anwar)

(Poem translated by Raza Khan from Urdu)

In another poem, Mustafa explains the tenants' grievances under the military landlords in the following way:

Poem 2

“It has been so long since the mounted division grabbed our land.
Why hasn't anybody, since then stopped their hand? Outsiders have become the lords of our

3 Pseudonyms are used for the peasants to protect their identities.

land.

This long denial of our rights I don't understand.

In 1947 we too were freed

Why does the army then treat us like a different breed?" (Anwar).

(Poem translated by Mariam Dogar from Punjabi).

These two poems of simultaneously explain the memory of the suffering of peasants and also the type of social lives that peasants had to live under military domination.

Deideologizing Everyday Experiences

Fanon's experience of French colonialism in Algeria led him to the conclusion that the colonial world is compartmentalized. For him, "it is obviously as superfluous to recall the existence of 'native' towns and European towns, schools for 'native' and schools for European, as it is to recall apartheid in South Africa." Compartmentalization is a division of the native and European lives in the colony. The dividing line between them is represented by the barracks and the police station. In the colonies, colonial agents of violence, the police, and the army display and demonstrate violence in the homes and in the minds of colonial subjects. We see the colonists use the language of pure violence against the colonized openly and without any secrecy. The compartmentalized life in the colonies, which is established by the colonizer through the use of pure violence, showed two different kinds of lives of two different kinds of "human species": the prosperous sector of Europeans and the shanty towns of natives. Fanon sketched the life of natives in the following way: "You are born anywhere, anyhow. You die anywhere, from anything. It's a world with no space, people are piled one on top of the other, the shacks squeezed tightly together. The colonized sector is a famished sector, hungry for bread, meat, shoes, coal, and light" (Fanon, 1963, p. 3, 4, 5).

The life of colonized villagers in OMFs was not different from the compartmentalized life sketched by Fanon under French colonialism. Haji Asghar, who is a resident of Renala Military Farm, explained what kind of life they had under military domination before the eruption of the peasant



movement. He explained that “we were like animals for them, in fact, we were treated more badly than Fojis’ (soldier’s) animals. They had some respect for their animals but we the humans, who do all work for them without asking anything in return were treated very disgracefully” (Asghar, interview, Dec 25th, 2015). Military Farm authorities’ employees used zoological terms for the tenants whenever they interacted with each other in routine matters. Tenants were being called by the names of animals that could lift heavy weight. Farm employees used to call tenants by the name of Baru⁴ whenever they needed unpaid labor. Fanon is of the view that colonized became a dehumanized subject in colonies. “In a plain talk, between colonizer and colonized, they are reduced to the state of animals and thereby when colonizer speak about colonized he uses zoological terms” (Fanon, 1963, p. 7). I found from the peasants’ stories that farm authorities despised tenants

⁴ Niamat Ali told me that the word ‘Baru’ is a zoological term for all those animals which are used in tedious and arduous work. “Farms’ employees used to call us ‘Baru’ because we did a lot of unpaid work for them.

with rude names. The marginalization of tenants was not limited to only the economic sphere. Thereby, under military landlordism, I understand the relationship between the landlord and tenants as a relationship of colonizer and colonized and the differences between the two manifested in many spheres. Materially, this was a difference between poor peasants, who lived in shanties, and prosperous military men, who have clean marvelous bungalows to live in and clean offices to work. Culturally, this difference was expressed between the educated, well-mannered, legally empowered, and disciplined soldiers with the ignorant layman and dehumanize tenants.

Peasants were not allowed to have paved houses. There were areas specified in each village about four acres by the military farm authorities where all the villagers lived in little shanties. Kaleem dweller of Walter Gunj 14.A.1.R of Renal Military Farms showed me small settlements where all the peasants of villages used to live before the eruption of the peasants' movement. He told me that almost a hundred years ago their ancestors came here and turned this barren land into lavish green fields of wheat, rice, corn, and fodder. Then farm authorities reserved this little piece of land for the village's residence, but with time "our families grew and it was impossible to live in this small piece of land for the whole village. In spite of our perpetual demand neither Angraz (British) Ma'am nor military officers permitted us to use more land for tenants' abode." Kaleem lamented military greed for agricultural land and expressed his grief with a deep sentiment that "in these shacks, we had no privacy of our families. He said, believe me, we lead a life of animals who do not have proper abode to live" (Kaleem, interview, Dec 29th, 2015). None of these villages had a place reserved for a school, mosque, and graveyard. Tenants of these villages used to bury their dead in the other villages. Siddique told me that "this was our biggest problem to bury our dead people. We did not have graveyards in our villages and therefore we used to go to other villages in search of a graveyard. Sometimes people of other villages turned up very generous and we got the place of a grave and sometimes they turned up otherwise and that left us with no option. Therefore we always tried to build good relations with people of other villages so we can exploit their generosity in a time of need" (Siddique, interview, Jan 2nd, 2016). Dil Bhar showed me a place where military authorities built a check post on Main Boulevard that led to all villages of Renala Military Farms. Every villager was used to search out by military soldiers when they left and entered villages. He told me that

our relatives from other places eschewed visiting our places because they abhorred this disgraceful attitude of farm authorities. We were directed by the Military Farm Authorities (MFA) to register a person who came to see us. This process was very distasteful for our relatives. He told me a story of one marriage procession that came from another village to pick up the bride but the bride's family forgot to inform MFA and could not get permission on time for the guests. When the marriage procession reached the check post to enter the village, military authorities stopped and asked them to show the certificate of permission to enter the village.

After a little disceptation between soldiers and the groom's family, soldiers started beating up the people including the groom and forced them to flee. This was a great degradation for the whole village, but we were not in a state to resist the military. After that, people of other villages eschewed accepting the marriage proposal of our daughters (Dil, interview, Jan 1st, 2016). "Baba Aleem from MFO told me that under the military we were used to working from morning to night without food and water. Military people summoned all the men of the village every morning before the office of the village supervisor. Everyone was required to sit on the earth in a few straight lines, and each day we were used to sitting in line almost an hour before the village supervisor appeared before us. He used to pick up people of his choice for corvee. First, we work for them. We clean their houses, their offices, and the roads where military mobiles rode, and on these roads, we were not allowed to walk. After completing their tasks, hungry and thirsty, then we rush to our fields to cut the fodder for our hungry animals and to water our fields. He also told me that we were not even allowed to eat or pluck food from our fields. He said this was a great zulum (brutality) on us. We cultivate a crop with arduous work, and these crops are ready to be reaped because of our blood and sweat but we were not allowed to even pluck a single grain to even taste what kind of crop we have produced. The village guard of MFA used to keep sight on each villager and if someone was found "thieving" from their field, they were charged with heavy fines. He told that our lives before our tanzeem were not different from the lives of slaves. We were never allowed to celebrate any Eid or any other national day. He said that on both Eids we were asked by military people to clean the whole villages and paint the roadside to decorate trees and their offices. Our whole day passed doing work without food and water, and each night when we returned to our home I went to my charpai (bed) without seeing a single person of my



family because, after a whole day of arduous work, I used to lose my sanity” (Aleem, interview, Jan 7th, 2016).

Besides that, military economic exploitation of peasants was intense. Jabbar Khumbo told me that under the share-cropping system, tenants and the military have to divide the production equally among themselves, but the military always took up more than 50%, and sometimes, according to his estimate, they snatched almost 70% of their production (Jabbar, interview, Jan 3rd, 2016). There was a system of “evaluation” of the production of fields. This system was imposed by farm authorities on the tenants’ crop production. According to that evaluation system, farm authorities used to estimate the expected production of each peasant’s land, and tenants were required to produce at least that estimated production. Abid cursed the evaluation method of the military. He was of the view that “this is a rapacious method. Fouji always deliberately estimated the expected production of our fields higher than the average production land normally produced.” He said it was a rapacious act of military authorities and they were always busy planning to grab the tenants’ crops⁵ (Abid, interview, Jan, 9th 2016).

⁵ Mubbashir Rizvi (2019) also discussed the MFA’s crop evaluation method. He also recorded the stories of the tenants in which they cursed this method as a rapacious method of soldiers.

Jameel from Colayana State's village also sketched their life under military landlordism more or less the same as Fanon sketched it in his book *The Wretched of the Earth*. He told me that we remained Ghulam (slave) even after 1947 when the British landlord left our country. He wished that "how good it would be if the Angraz (British) also took Pakistani Fouj (military) with them so that we can genuinely get freedom from servitude." He asked me: "Tell me. You are an educated man. What type of freedom is this when the British left our land and the Pakistan Army seized them again, so we remain slaves, now of Pakistan army and before them of Colonel Cole?"⁶ He also said "now our conditions are much better after the successful resistance to the military but before that there were no Chudary (landlord or Yeoman) in the village and every one of us was Kammi (landless laborer class) for them regardless of their caste and the size of landholding. He said, you better tell me, a village peon who is a grade 4 employee in farm authorities and he is not an officer, but in fact, he must be poorer than us in his home. But when he used to take a round of our villages, all tenants hold their breath and everyone was required to salute him. These village peons were used to summon us and also used to write our attendance before the village office and they used to call our name with a derogation and did not even care to respect our elders." He told me that "military officers asked us to send our daughters and wives to their homes for work in their home." He said "they deliberately asked for our women for services in their houses and this was a most disgraceful thing for us. He also told me that to penalize the alleged lazy woman worker, officers order her to stand the whole day outside his office without dobata"⁷ (Jameel, interview, Jan 16th 2016).

Decolonized Social Life: A Perspective and Practice of Peace from Below

Wheat Water Knead the Dough, Do Not Let the Pak Army Go.
(Peasants' chant)

6 Sir Colonel Cole was a British cavalry officer who received a grant of 7500 acres under horse breeding schemes. See Ali, Imran. (1988). pp. 156–157.

7 *Dobata* is a garment that is used by females to cover their heads and faces.

Decolonization is truly the creation of new men. But such a creation cannot be attributed to a supernatural power: The 'thing' colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation. (Fanon, 1963, p. 2)

Following Fanon's analysis about decolonization, this essay sheds light on the inception and the struggle of Anjuman Muzareen Punjab, which reclaimed peasants lost self and identity, their distorted social existence, and their infiltrated economy from military domination. All in all, the whole struggle of tenants under the united banner of AMP was a struggle for the decolonization of tenants' colonized life from the domination of the military. The tenants of OMFs inflicted a collective resistance upon the army in the year 2000 when the military posed a threat of permanent eviction to peasants from their lands and villages.

The initial events of decolonization of peasants' life started in late 2000 after the formation of AMP. That was a time when in all villages of OMF, striking events of resistance by peasants and coercion by military⁸ were happening in several forms.

Virtues of the People

Dil Bhar Khombo told me the stories of how the people of Ranala Military Farm united to resist military domination to get freedom from military rule. He told me that chak Kurd 20.1.R played a central and significant role to unite and give courage to people of other villages of RMF. In the year 1996, Iqbal's house collapsed, and the resident of Kurd 20.1.R village, because of heavy rains that year. He rebuilt his house afterward many times because it used to collapse or be heavily damaged due to each rain of the season. Dil Bhar told me that they were never allowed by Military Farm's authorities to get their houses paved. They were not allowed to get bricks inside the village, and if someone was caught carrying bricks inside the village, "even a single brick," then that person was called by the farm's authorities the very

8 Pakistan Rangers (a paramilitary force) made two military campaigns in the year 2002 and 2003. The tenants' villages were sieged, electricity and telephone contentions were cut and the free movements of the villagers inside the village and to leave their villages were barred. For a detailed account of these paramilitary campaigns to suppress the tenants please see Human Rights Watch report: Ali Dayan Hasan (2004), Soiled hands: The Pakistan Army's repression of the Punjab farmers' movement and see Murphy, E. (2013). Class conflict, state terrorism and the Pakistani military: The Okara military farms dispute.



next day to see Colonel Ali (the then presiding officer of RMF).

People of RMF shared collective feelings of agony towards him. According to the tenants, he used to penalize them severely on petty mistakes such as if you were caught with even a single brick carrying inside the village, then he used to give certain kinds of punishments to tenants such as the convicted person was ordered by Colonel Ali to stand on one foot the whole day in the scorching sun before his office. Iqbal was very downhearted because his mud house was unable to stand for a long time before a rain or a storm and he had to make and repair his house many times after it first collapsed because of heavy rains in 1996. For each new construction or repair of his mud house, he had to bribe farm authorities to dig mud from his fields. In 2000, when the whole village united under the banner of AMP to struggle against the “servitude”⁹ under which their ancestors and they were living for several decades, they said to Iqbal: “Iqbal, go and get bricks for your house

⁹ Tenants used the word *ghulami* (servitude) very frequently whenever they explain their social conditions under military landlordism. It is very striking that life before the formation of AMP was a life of *ghulami* and life after the formation of AMP is a life of *azadi* (freedom) for tenants.

and the whole village will stand with you.” That day Iqbal purchased bricks for his house and the whole village gathered before the military check post. They together let the tractor trolley full of bricks pass into the village, and the military soldiers on the check post lowered their guns down in front of hundreds of villagers. The next day military farms authorities asked Iqbal to show himself to Colonel Ali. The tenants decided that they will not let Iqbal go alone to see him, but rather the whole village would go with him to see the Colonel. Hundreds of villagers went along with Iqbal to see Colonel Ali. When they reached outside the Colonel’s office and when the Colonel saw a huge mob of people, he got furious. He said, “I only called Iqbal. Why the hell are you all here”? They replied, with one voice, “we are all Iqbal. Tell us why you called us (Iqbal) here.” That day, they all returned to their village with victorious feelings. Afterward, they all started to get bricks and paved their houses, and “nobody dared to stop us,” in Dil Bhar words (Dil, interview, Jan 2nd, 2016). Later they all refused to pay corvee to the military too.

Along with this, I also heard many other stories from the peasants that after their organization was built, they refused to give fodder from their fields to military dairy farms. As Anwar Ariyan residents of chak 4.4.L MFO told me after the formation of their tanzeem, people of villages felt some courage inside them, and they openly refused to obey farm authorities. He told me that tenants refused to give a portion of fodder of their field to military dairy farms.

Besides sharecropping tenants were also obliged to surrender a half portion of the fodder of their fields to the military dairies.

Anwar told me that when tenants refused to surrender a portion of fodder for dairy farms, then military officers started to beseech tenants for a very small portion of fodder, but they blatantly refused to do that. Anwar derisively said to me that “this refusal was like a starvation message to greedy soldiers who never did little chores before and now they have to produce fodder themselves for their animals” (Anwar, interview, Jan 8th, 2016).

Dil Bhar told me that after Iqbal’s episode of “bricks” in Kurd 20.1.R, people of other villages of Renala State contacted them and asked them whether they may be part of this organization which was welcomed by the villagers and leaders of AMP warmly. People of four villages Khurd, Kala, Devisarabad, and Lewis Pura in RMF got united under the AMP except



for two villages of RMF Hazel Pura and Walter Gunj, which joined AMP early in the year 2007 when the tenants of Colyana State also joined the AMP. The entire Colyana state and the two villages of RMF unlike the other four villages of RMF and MFO villages were tilling land under the rent- in-cash system since their incorporation by the military after the partition of India. The land of Colayana State and the two villages of RMF are allotted to retired military officers who charge annual rent to tenants. Dil Bhar told me that when the RMF united under AMP, then every tenant started to pave their houses in RMF. He told me that farm authorities and Colonel Ali were helpless before their organization. Whenever the tractor trolley full of bricks reached the check post of the military, the tenants of four villages together let it pass in the villages and with time no house in these villages was not paved, Dil Bhar told me (Dil, interviewed by the author, Jan 2nd, 2016).

The paving of houses by tenants informs us about the process of decolonization of tenants' life. This decolonization started with the paving of houses and ended with the complete expulsion of the military from the social lives of tenants' villages. Colonization is the control of the social lives

of colonized (tenants) by the colonizer (military), and contrary to that the process of decolonization subverts, this phenomenon and instead of the colonizer (military) the colonized (tenants) themselves completely control their lives and repel the colonizer (military) from their territory.

Praxis

The process of decolonization that started with the paving of houses continued, and it took more robust forms with time. The tenants started to challenge and remove all signs of domination and colonization from their villages.

In January of 2002, Colonel Ali sent his private ruffians to Kala village of RMF to expropriate the land of a tenant late Shaheed Shabir,¹⁰ who was killed by a bullet of the military in a skirmish between tenants and the military over the appropriation of his land by the Colonel's private hooligans (military authorities used this tactic of private thugs on several occasions to intimidate villagers. A similar case happened in Colyana State after their articulation with AMP in the year 2007. A retired army officer sent private hooligans, who were notorious for their criminal activities in that region, to grab the land from the tenant's control. In that skirmish, tenants of Colyana state as usual were defenseless before the armed hooligans of retired army officers. During the confrontation of both parties, three tenants get murdered and several, including women, were injured). Many people from all four villages gathered to retake possession of the land. The tenants were confronted first by Colonel Ali's private hooligans, and when the Colonel's hooligans observed that the situation is getting out of their hands, then they called the army for their assistance. Then tenants were confronted directly by military soldiers who came to help their private hooligans. Rafique told me that tenants of four villagers came to encounter the worse situations including him and nobody had any type of gun; rather the tenants' weapons were tilling instruments which they use to dig mud. The army opened fire on the defenseless villagers, and in that fight, four to five villagers got injured by the army's fire. One of the villagers died on the spot, but Colonel Ali could not snatch the land from the tenants, Rafique told me. When this conflict was over, the furious villagers destroyed the

10 Human Right Watch (2004) also recorded this incident in their report.

military check post that was on the main road which leads to all villages of Renala Estate, where military soldiers used to search out each villager when they would enter the village and where the tenants' relatives from the other villages needed permission before from the farm authorities to enter in the villages. As Aslam told me that, "this check post was a border for us like India and Pakistan and each time when we entered in our villages soldiers used to stop us then search out our body and checked our national identity cards and then let us enter in our villages. When tenants demolish the check post then the Army soldiers on duty fled from the spot. Later, District Police Officer Okara and Rangers came to harass people but we were standing united and never get scared again," Aslam said in a robust voice.

In addition to this, a lot of other things happened that further assert the decolonized self of tenants. By demolishing different symbols of military domination, the tenants reaffirmed their decolonized selves. There were farm authorities' offices in each village of military farms where tenants were forced to sit on their feet in line for hours waiting for the farm officer, wondering when will he come and assign them their duties and penalize the convicted tenants for their transgressions and at night they took attendance of each tenant with their work progress. All in all, these offices were a major symbol of military domination upon tenants, and these were sort of military headquarters from where they used to control the tenants' social lives. When the process of decolonization started by the tenants under the banner of AMP, they broke many symbols of domination and among them was one of these farm's offices in each village. In some villages, offices were occupied by homeless tenants, and in some, they remained emptied and wrecked and used as a bin for a whole village to dispose of their wastes.

Under military domination, the thing that made tenants less human was the structure of their collective social life. They used to live in shanty towns in little mud shacks. Their villages were without graveyards, mosques, playgrounds, and schools. Tenants were not allowed to observe any religious, cultural, or national days. Inshallah, a resident of Hazel Pura, pointed with fingers at one house and told me that "where now one family is living in this house before the formation of AMP twenty families were used to live in this small place." Therefore, the process of decolonization for the tenants was to reclaim those things which are part of the collective social life of the village from which they were deprived under military domination or colonization of their lives. As Fanon contended, it is the very process of

decolonization that makes the colonized subject a complete human being. After the tenants' successful resistance, in which they repelled the military from their villages and took a control of their own social lives, they rebuilt the structure of their social lives. This reconstruction of decolonized life of tenants included many things such as building big paved mosques, having playgrounds for children, and having a place for a graveyard, to re-scheme the residential areas, distributing land to landless tenants who were evicted from their lands or had no land at all; to make barren land cultivable; and to celebrate or observe religious, social, and peasants' tanzeem (organization) days. Nazeer Khokar from Walter Gunj told me that after tanzeem they allocated more area for residences. He pointed toward one side and said, this was the old settlement, he pointed to another side, this is the new settlement that we made after AMP. He told me that the district officer came many times to intimidate us, saying that we cannot do this, it is illegal. He said, "In response, we told him each time very gently that this is our land and our village so you do not need to intervene" (Nazeer, interview, Jan 29th, 2016).

The other major difference that we noticed in the tenants' villages of military farms with other villages of Punjab after the peasants' movement is the social life of villages that is very much attached to tenants' tanzeem AMP. Decolonized life of tenants' villages is dependent on the tenants' organization AMP. Kinship structures (biradries) that are a very fundamental social unit of village life were absent/non- functional in these villages before the eruption of the movement because the preconditions that are necessary for kinship ties were absent due to institutional landlordism of the army. The literature on Punjab villages' societies delineates at least three economic classes in the Punjab villages as follows:

1. The landlord class which is the major economic class of the village consists of a few families who own major portions of village lands and also control the politics of the village. Often, two landlords from the same economic class, but from different castes or patti and sometimes from the same castes, even compete in the political arena.
2. The artisan and small businessman class¹¹ of society, who normally do not hold any land and in some cases very little piece of land. Artisan class's economic activity depended on their profession and occupational caste, like Nai (hairdresser and cook), Tarkhan (carpenter), and Dhaba

11 S. Ahmad in his study "peasant classes of Pakistan" categorized villages' classes into two categories of 'Zamindar' and 'Kammis'. He did have another class of small businessmen in the villages who run their small businesses like general stores, cloth shops, etc. and he also put the artisan class in the 'Kammis' category.

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- (tailor), and also little business classes also exist in the villages who do have small shops of cloths, departmental stores, or sweets shops.
3. Landless land laborer caste, the most impoverished class of villager. They do work on the land of the big landholding class of the village (Ahmad, 1972, p. 61).

These all classes in the villages are tied around their biradries.¹² This social network of villages also has profound effects on the political alignments at the time of elections. According to many studies during elections, the major landholding class who also dominate the political sphere gather votes based on kinship ties and clientelism. All in all, the biradries network are central social units of villages that actively influence the process of politics at the time of elections.¹³ On the other hand, we find very different social hierarchies in the villages of AMP before the emergence of their movement. There was one landlord in these villages which is a central dominant institution. Under its ascendancy, no social hierarchies in the villages could be established. Unlike our above derivation of three economic and social classes of villages, under military landlordism, there was only one economic and social class, and these were tenants. Biradries network ceased to exist in these villages even though there were all castes present in these villages from landholding to artisan and land laborer, but there could not be established any social hierarchies in these villages. Aniyat Ali, a tenant from the MFO, explained this phenomenon very interestingly: “In the military time there was no distinction of Muslim and Christian, there was no division of Ariyan and Mousali (land laborer) among peasants for the military because we were all slaves for them. They treated all of us very derisively without any distinction of whether he is a fellow Muslim or not, and whether he is Jat (land owning class of Punjab) or Mousali (landless laborer)” (Aniyat, interview, Jan 20th, 2016). Similarly, after the formation of the AMP movement in these villages, the social and political structures that emerged there are yet outright different than the other villages of Punjab. The social structures and hierarchies that emerged after the peasants’ movements are also very different than the typical villages of Punjab. Tenants’ tanzem AMP perform all those social and political functions that are performed by kinship ties or briadires in other villages. It is not to say that people are completely free from their

¹² For example see, Alavi, H. A. (1972). Kinship in west Punjab villages. *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, 6(1), 1–27. For more discussion on the kinship structures of Punjab’s villages. ¹³ For example see, Mohmand, S. K. (2014). Losing the connection: party-voter linkages in Pakistan. *Commonwealth & Comparative Politics*, 52(1), 7–31.

primordial loyalties of caste, religion, and briadries but rather that their manifestation in social and political structures of villages is different from the other villages of Punjab. AMP as tanzeem of tenants plays the role of a major mediator in routine conflict of peasants. These conflicts normally come for mediation to the symbolic headquarters.¹³

Along many social statuses like caste, briadries, and religion, there is another status of tanzeem's leader that is a major source of social capital and prestige in these villages. People's day-to-day life gatherings and sittings occur as tanzeem members like to organize a game tournament with the name of tanzeem and then call tanzeem's leaders as chief guests. The social places of tenants' gatherings are also built around tanzeem, and major bhetaks (community gatherings) of tenants also occurred on tanzeem headquarters. In addition to this, tanzeem also celebrates and observes several days. These events are exclusively attached with tanzeem like the 10th Dec day of Shaheed Bashir day is celebrated in RMF each year. On this day, tenants from all over RMF gather on Ch. Nadeem Ashraf dehra to observe the death anniversary of Shaheed Bashir. According to tenants, Bashir was the first person who sacrificed his life for the cause of tenants, and thereby they observe his death anniversary each year on 10th Dec. Such events and tenants' gatherings are a permanent source of their radical politics, and this also keeps fresh tenants' collective history of suffering. In mosques and especially in Juma prayers, Imam-e-Masjid talks about tanzeem, and prayers are offered for arrested tanzeem leaders and other members of AMP. Furthermore, AMP is a prevailing political force in tenants' villages. However, other competing political forces do exist in these villages too, who do politics on the base of kinship ties or clientelism, but they have never succeeded in the local body elections against the tenants' tanzeem AMP. AMP tenants call their opponent tenants, who participate in the anti-tanzeem activities through competing elections, and by becoming police informants, "Amen group" (peaceful group), this is a derisive term for those who are ready to compromise with the military and always try to win military generosity through fawning military and police, according to AMP tenants. I observed in tenants' villages that people who are labeled with Amen group in villages, because of their presumptively anti-tanzeem activities, have been ostracized by tenants of AMP from the village community. In the last local body elections Oct 2015, AMP candidates score all the seats in all

13 These places are usually houses of leaders of AMP in each village.

military farms of Okara against the candidates of Pakistan Muslim League (N), the leading party in the national and provincial assembly of Punjab at that time. Local body elections consist of one union council (UC) chairman for each UC and four to five general councilors in each UC. AMP scored all the chairman and general councilor's seats against the then leading party of the province Muslim League (N) except one seat of general councilor. AMP won total of eight chairmen of three military farms of Okara and almost 18 general councilors in local body elections of 2015. One UC chairman seat was contested and won by Christian tenants of AMP against a Muslim contestant of the Muslim League (N) party. We can observe an underlying tension between kinship ties, castes, and Religion with the tenants' tanzem AMP as one AMP candidate lost his seat in local body elections in 2015. I asked Rafique why AMP candidate Ikram lost the elections of general councilors against his opponents, who had a ticket of Muslim League (N), while all the other candidates of AMP won the elections. He told me that Ikram was chosen as a candidate for general councilors by AMP, but another fellow tenant also wanted to contest this seat, and he rejected the decision of AMP leadership he also contested elections on the AMP ticket.¹⁴ Therefore, both candidates have a photo of Nadeem Ashraf (who was in Jail at that time) on their election campaign banners, and thereby according to Rafique, the votes of AMP tenants divided in apparently two candidates of AMP which gave leverage to Muslim League (N) candidate who was mobilizing tenants on caste, biradrie, and clientelism. Rafique told me that he only won by 14 votes, and this means that our tanzem is still dominant and not weak. This specific case depicts the underlying tension between kinship ties, biradries, caste, and religion within the AMP. The tensions between the two candidates of general councilors also rested on the biradrie, caste politics, and the opponents who are so far losers in every local body election since the formation of AMP also score substantial numbers of votes, though not enough to defeat their opponent candidates of AMP.

14 AMP is not a registered party with the election commission of the country, in these villages AMP tickets for elections mean that the chosen candidate of AMP wrote on his campaign banners the name of *tanzem* and also print the photo of the leader of the respective military farm.

Conclusion

Tenants were very proud of what they have achieved through their collective struggles. As Aslam, a peasant activist of AMP pointed his finger toward a playground where children and teenagers were playing volleyball and cricket. He said this is for what we have resisted and this is what we have achieved. Our children can play, go to school, offer prayers, and host a guest at our houses. He further said, Look at us we are having a very friendly and emotional conversation something we could never imagine having under the military (Aslam, interviewed by the author, 27th March 2016)

This essay analyzed the land rights movement of the peasantry of Punjab to show that the peasants' movement for land rights is aimed at liberating their social life not just the agricultural land. In so doing, the essay theorized and highlighted social-ontological acts of resistance, such as building paved houses, playgrounds, schools, and mosques and destroying the symbols of dominations. Further, this essay highlights and analyzes that these acts of resistance would only be visible if we understand the social, political, and historical context of the peasants' subjugation. Peasants' subjugation was not limited to the control of their agricultural land, but it was just one aspect of their social subjugation under military landlordism.

Further, this essay sheds light how colonial violent state-making processes shaped state-society relationships in post-colonial Pakistan. The peasants' subjugation sheds light on that how the colonial structures are continued and sustained by the postcolony. Formal independence from the colonial master is not a liberation but a continuation of the same violence in new forms and disguises. Further, this chapter highlights and theorizes through the peasants' struggles that how peace is possible from the perspectives and the agencies of the subaltern that is delinked from our colonial past and neocolonial present.

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