

## **VIRTUES OF FOOD AUTONOMY, COOPERATIVE FARMING & SUFIC-SOCIALIST REGIMES**

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### **Abstract**

In peasantivist relations in Sindh, different political and economic ideologies are competing with each other by articulating various peasant issues in different political languages. There is a clash between corporate farming and cooperative farming strategies, and between the notions of 'food security' and 'food sovereignty'. In this study, documentary analysis of local literature on peasant activism has been triangulated with the primary data collected during field work, about peasant activism in lower Sindh. Effort has been made to look into the tendency of feudal and capitalist elements to bring about capital-intensive 'agrarian reform' instead of pro-peasant 'land reforms'. The shaping up of agrarian relations in Sindh has been critiqued in the light of post-developmental notion of 'food autonomy'. In the end, in the light of generated arguments, possibility for the establishment of localized Sufic-socialist Agrarian regime or to become the part of moral global economy has been predicted. Keeping the notion of 'food autonomy' and the establishment of communal agrarian regimes in perspective, peasant activists in Sindh, not only have to remain informed about the theoretical and ideological positioning of trans-local peasant communities, but have also to streamline and adapt their peasantivist agendas with transnational peasant movements through sustained activism.

**Key words:** *Food Autonomy, Food Sovereignty, Sufic-socialist regimes*

## **Introduction**

Issues of peasant activists in Sindh have shifted in focus over the years and have attended to scores of issues that somehow attend to rural folks and peasant communities. These issues may include disputes over the optimum flow of Indus water into canals, flooding during Monsoon season, drought and famine in Thar Desert, health of the Indus delta, building of small or large dams, institutionalization of corporate farming, formation of cooperative farming, epidemics in livestock, and the issues of debt bondage in agriculture. This study is an effort to facilitate the peasant activists and indigenous rural communities of Sindh to relate and analyze their life-world and life projects in the light of 'food autonomy' regime as against 'food security' and 'food sovereignty' regimes and, thereby, to suggest the localized indigenous sufic-socialist model of peasantivist resistance.

Peasant movements, that have been launched in Sindh, despite their apparent failure to achieve their avowed goals, have sustained their activism to bring about gradual reformation of peasant society. That sustained activism, at least, served as the experimental venture to test Marxist, Maoist, reformist and developmentalist solutions, but none could live up to the contextual realities and lived experiences of local peasant communities. Keeping these failed experiments in perspective, and by juxtaposing agrarian reforms, corporate farming, food security and neo-liberal capitalist NGO rising against the land reforms, cooperative farming, food autonomy, and the trans-local moral global economy, the possibility of the formation of trans-local link in Sindh in the form of Sufi-socialist drifting of peasant activism, has been predicted in this study. Hence, in this study, trans-local sufic-socialist approach has been suggested to peasant activists of Sindh by digging it out of their archeological past and then linking it with global transnational peasant movements to establish agrarian regimes based on global moral order.

## **Methodology**

This research study has been derived from the field work and from the secondary qualitative data analysis of historical documents and the literature produced by and for peasant activists in Sindh. In-depth interviews with some of the prominent peasant activists have also been relied upon. Primary ethnographic data has, then,

been triangulated with the documentary analysis of literature on the history of peasant movements in Sindh. Hence, historical analysis of peasant movements and activism in Sindh has been done to predict the direction of peasant activism in Sindh in the light of some modern and post-developmental notions, particularly the possibilities of the establishment in Sindh of viable trans-local agrarian regimes interlinked with the global moral economy.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Theoretical and ethnographic analysis of peasant communities in Sindh and Gujarat done by Jan Breman (1985, 2008, 2010, and 2014) has been extensively employed here to understand the nature of exploitation in peasant-landlord relationship and the resulting reaction of peasant activists of Sindh. The analytic framework evolved by subaltern theorists from India, such as Guha (2001), Sarkar (2001), Kapoor (2013), Zibechi & Ryan (2012), have been resorted to draw parallels between indigenous Dalit peasant activists of India and Sindh.

In the end, post-developmental global trends, particularly in the light of theoretical analysis of Philip McMichael (2008), Arturo Escobar (2001, 2012) and Eduardo Gudynas (2011, 2013), have been linked to, or the links have been explored between transnational peasant movements and Sindhi peasant activism. To understand the peasantry in its global and international context, Philip Mc Michael's post-developmental critique of neo-liberal globalization, provides, probably, the most plausible explanations of the status and identity of peasantry. Taking lead from Philip Mc Michael, peasant activism has been explored through the peasant discourse and practices generated by peasant activists of Sindh and peasant leaders to understand, not only contemporary and historical peasant movements in lower Sindh, but the whole spectrum of political and social movements which somehow have involved peasants and the peasant activists of Sindh. Possibilities of Sindhi peasant activists to become the active and integrated part of the highly diversified global peasant movement have been predicted on the basis of their assumed expected activism for 'food sovereignty' and 'food autonomy' for peasants, and against developmentalists, and 'corporate farming'.

Data on the history of peasant movements in Sindh has been collected from the writings of Soomro K.H (2012), Badshah (2011), Mahar (2011), G.M.Sayed

(2011). Shah Inayat's suffic-socialist movement has been revisited in to draw parallels between his peasant movement and the Latin American and transnational peasant movements. Arturo Escobar's (2001) emphasis on the 'place' and the de-emphasis on 'space' have served as the ontological as well as epistemological departing point in this study.

Reformatory socialist program of 'alternatives to development' as outlined and being implemented by Venezuela, Bolivia (*BuenVivir*<sup>1</sup> as an alternative) and in Ecuador (*SumakKawsay*), which is derived from Bolivarian political ideology (Pearson 2009; Lang 2013; Escobar 2012; Gudynas, 2011), was found very much pertinent to suggest and recommend decentralizing and community empowering development program for peasant communities in particular, and rural communities in general.

### **Reforming Agrarian Relationships: For Whom and By Whom?**

The terms 'land reforms' and 'agrarian reforms' are used and understood in two distinctive senses that, in fact, reflect two competing political ideologies. Former pertains to socialist change to redistribute land, and the latter to the maximization of agricultural growth through capital intensive development and mechanization. Whereas, elsewhere in the world, where land reforms were brought about by the national democratic governments with some success, issues of landlessness and land related exclusion have somehow persisted there. It has been observed that such land reforms alone or any economic transformation may not lead, as intended, to social inclusion of marginalized communities. After such realization, peasant activists for the landless peasants in other regions of the world have started struggling not just for land to live and cultivate, but also for better social positions to have access to "a wider range of social interactions and networks" and for better place in society" (Lindemann June 2010). Jan Breman in his ethnographic revelations in the light of his four decades of engagement with

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<sup>1</sup> '*BuenVivir*' literally means the 'living well' or 'good life'. It is the Latin American and Bolivian concept evolved by indigenous peasant communities to encapsulate their indigenous ideology and the political program to counter extractivism, export-driven markets, neoliberal corporate culture and to establish communal authority and ensure 'food autonomy' of the local 'ecological communities. Similar types of notions have been conceptualized by other Latin American countries as well, such as the Ecuadorian concept of *sumackawsay*. *BuenVivir* is a set of attempts to build other social and economic orders that break free of the bounds imposed by Modernity.

peasant communities in Gujarat, and his ethnographic survey of peasant communities in lower Sindh, also have reached to the similar conclusions. Social and economic exclusion persists both in Gujarat and lower Sindh, largely due to already established hegemonic administrative, legal and political system in which the landless peasants, migrant peasants and ethnic peasant minorities cannot benefit from the concessions and quotas offered to them by the government and by the law of the land (Breman 1985). It is the doing of corrupt administrative system “the identification pattern, bureaucratic procedures, hard-to-match government criteria for the targeted group had excluded a large section of society from claiming their legal right” (Pushpa 2013). The prevailing traditional nepotism and vested interest of feudal politicians to maintain exploitative sharecropping system (Breman 2014) are some other causal factors that perpetuate peasant exploitation and keep them dispossessed, disempowered, socially excluded and thus marginalized. Moreover, the very state of powerlessness of the would-be benefactors that is sustained by systemic exclusion socially disables them to even seek offered benefits and legal protections. Breman also laments the fact that peasant activists and advocacy based NGOs often fail short of substantive change and sustainable development.

Giving an example of the bonded laborers that are released from the private jails or from the social bondage of landlords in lower Sindh, he concludes his report on the nature of bondage in South Asia with optimistic remarks:

Certainly, these agricultural workers were set free by the police but rather than being inspired by a concern for the plight of *haris*- no mention is made if and how this lot is going to be rehabilitated - it is more likely that the raid was carried out because of political strife between local landlords. The route to emancipation seems longer and more difficult in Pakistan than elsewhere in South Asia, but this must not be an excuse for not striving to achieve it. (Breman 2010, p. 24)

Peasant communities in Sindh, or probably elsewhere in the world seem to be caught in the Scylla of feudal regime within their ecological niches, and Chyribidis of corporate food regime based on transnational market system; both aiming at the dispossession, suppression, economic exploitation and the de-politicization of the peasantry in the global South. The agrarian crises has been

generalized and rationalized through the capitalist notion of ‘free trade regime’. The neoliberalists believe that the peasants in the south have to inevitably follow the path of capitalism and corporate culture. But the fact of the matter is that peasants are not just a laggard class in itself that is struggling to catch up with the advanced classes. It is not at all path-dependent. Rather it is anti-accumulation, contingent and contextually driven having some of its own basic internal dynamics independent of globalizing trends.

Hence, although landless peasants’ struggle launched by the peasant activists and the civil society, for example, as it unfolds itself in China and in Brazil, for their rights to have land for living and cultivation, (Lindemann June 2010), and also in most of the agrarian developing countries of South-East Asia, is struggling for more than mere land reforms. The issue that concerns them most in this neo-liberal and post-liberal globalizing world is that of ‘food’, not mere land reforms. They question the monolithic neoliberal discourse by deconstructing its fundamentals. They ask if the food is more than mere a ‘commodity’. Is the production of food good only for growth, consumption and export? Is it so that the ‘food security’ the necessary and the right slogan to ensure the proper supply of food for the global community. Is it the growth and agricultural production that is more important and valuable than the environmental preservation and indigenous values related to food. Peasant activists all over the world answer such queries into the negations. Instead they affirm that the production of the food is either the sovereign right of the states (food sovereignty), or the autonomous prerogative of ecological communities (food autonomy).

### **Tran-local Sufic-socialist Regimes: Linking Present with Past and Places**

As mentioned earlier, peasant activism in Sindh has had a history of partial successes. NGOs-led activism and modern development is not a primary factor that originated peasant activism in Sindh. NGOs intervention in the area was marginal before 80s, substantially increased in late 90s as the international donors as well as the government became convinced of the failure of the state-managed development projects and the successive governments to deliver to the masses. Peasant activism through civil society organizations was also bolstered, mainly due to change in international political order after the dissolution of USSR, that brought about change in mode of action of the so called Maoist and Marxists

peasant activists, who opened up their own foreign-funded NGOs to advocate for peasant rights and land reforms. Yet, it should not mean that peasant activism in Sindh started off in the latter half of previous century.

Socialist peasant activism in Sindh even predates, the communist ideology and colonial subaltern struggles. Historically, the most commonly mentioned event that led to the open conflict at collective level in Sindh, between landlord and the peasants occurred 1718 AD in Mughal era under *Subaidari* of Azam Khan, when local tribal chiefs were conferred authority to collect revenue from peasants. Sufi Shah Inayat, a local spiritual leader launched a peasant movement and introduced the Sufi-socialist notion of '*Jo Khere, So Khaaey*' which literally means, 'The one who tills, should eat'. (Soomro K. H., 2012; Badshah, 2011; Mahar, 2011; G.M.Sayed, 2011)

Shah Inayat had, in fact, established a peasant communion on the model of communalism (communal socialism) by allowing his follower peasants to till the land that was allotted to his ancestor-spiritual leaders by the Tarkhan rulers of Sindh. He just took the share from crop enough for the tendering of *Khanqah* or *Dargah*. The rest was equally distributed between individual peasant workers. This was novel and quite an extraordinary practice that defied the traditional practice of feudalism and Shrine-worshipping. His socialist commune attracted several peasant families of the nearby villages particularly to followers of another nearby *Dargah* at Bulri. (Mahar, 2011, pp. 28,29,30) Jhok communes were immune from paying any *abwaab* (extra shares and taxes) to landlord, and from serving as unpaid laborers and from paying official land tax. (Badshah 2011, p. 134).

After the murder of Shah Inayat, his followers didn't follow his message of peaceful resistance and Sufic socialism, and just remained attached to the spread Sufic pantheism through Sufic singing and poetry. But that circumstantial failure does not reduce the historical value of the peasant communes established by Shah Inayat. Establishment of such type of peasant commune, even for the period of few months, is the ideal of peasant activists of Sindh even today. Hussain Badsha (2011), in his book emphasizes the relevance and need for Sufic socialism of Shah Inayat Shaheed. According to Badsha adverse sociopolitical condition of rural Sindh are still the same as that late Mughal era when Shah Inayat's socialist peasant communism was sabotaged. The corruption of state institutions today,

perhaps, necessitates the socialist Sufic cult of peasant cooperatives of the kind established by Shah Inayat. (Badshah 2011, p. 10).

Sufic-socialist ideology, inspired from the poetic philosophy of Shah of Bhatt, the Sufi poet of Sindh, has already been adopted by the Sindhi nationalists, and somewhat differently by all leftist organizations of Sindhi people. But, it being inspired by poetry, not the concrete historical event, bears little practical values, at least, as far as, socialist and structural change in society is concerned. That missing link can be provided by the reinterpretation of the socialist peasant movement of Shah Inayat with the purpose to establish sufic-socialist agrarian regimes throughout Sindh. The ideal of ‘Jo Khere, So Khaey’ is, in fact, a very broad concept which encapsulates the complete philosophy of life for rural folks. Shah Inayat’s political and social program, in its essence, is still relevant to the peasant issues of rural Sindh, as the distorted systemic remnants of feudalistic system of the past are still dominating the socio-political scene of rural Sindh. It can serve as the uniting bond between various trans-local peasant communities of Sindh and Pakistan. Bhooro Mal Kolhi, a prominent Kolhi-Dalit activist, for instance, believes that untouchable communities of lower Sindh were with Shah Inayat Shaheed during his struggle against landlordism and feudalism of that time (Kolhi B. M., 2014, p. 83). Hence, Shah Inayat’s peasant movement was, and is widely believed to be inclusive of all lower castes, peasants and laborers of the region. Hence from both Dalit as well as Hindu perspective, Sufic socialism of Sindh is not antithetical to Hinduism or Dalitanism. Malkani has quoted Annemarie Schimmel that:

In Sindh, the borders between Hinduism and Islam were not hermetically closed. A classic example of this close connection is ‘Sur Ramkali’ in Shah Abdul Latif’s ‘Risalo’, a poem in which this mystic praises the wandering yogis in terms taken from Quran and Hadith. SachalSarmast and his followers have not hesitated to sing the essential Unity of Being that manifests itself now in Abu Hanifa, now in Hanuman, now in the Vedas, now in the Quran.” (Malkani 1997, p. 129)

Hence, Kolhian Hinduism being syncretic is also very much in line with Sufic or Sufic-socialist Islam. Therefore, peasant activists as well as Sindhi ethno-nationalists politicians and state policy-makers should look for synergies in



different religious practices. Moreover, in the context of Parkari Kolhi community, their migration from ecologically unsustainable region of Tharr desert, their status as bonded agricultural laborers at Barrage area, and the current debate in Sindh on corporate versus cooperative farming need to be analyzed in the light of Philip Mc Michael's and Arturo Escobar's insights. Shah Inayat's ideology that 'the land and produce belongs to the tiller' (Soomro, 2012; Badshah, 2011; Mahar, 2011; G.M.Sayed, 2011) has parallel voice in the 21<sup>st</sup> century post-developmental, Arturo Escobar. Believing that the 'culture sits in places' (Escobar, 2001), the distribution of land and wealth amongst the local ecological places or niches, in accordance with the potential of individual members of the community or locality, is the principle that almost all contemporary post-developmental scientists are forcefully attesting. Sufic-socialist alternative can serve as the local reflection of "the indigenous cosmovision of co-existence with nature" that may take material, ecological and spiritual development as a single 'whole' and as the integral part of the worldview of every ecological community (Alcoreza, 2013), and thus interconnected and networked with transnational and trans-local global moral agrarian regimes. Therefore, it would be desirable for peasant activists of Sindh to pursue that trans-localizing and trans-nationalizing course to make it an integral part of peasantivist, communal political agenda.

Hence, the emancipatory strategic model proposed and tried out by Shah Inayat can serve as the 'cosmovision' for the marginalized peasant communities of lower Sindh. The ideal of '*Jo Kherey, So Khaey*' given by Shah Inayat, has the potential to be transformed into a posdevelopmental model similar to the ones developed by Bolivia in the form of *BuenVivir*, by Ecuador in the form of *SumakKawsay*, and the Venezuelan initiative of establishing 'communal councils' on the basis of Bolivarian ideology (Gudynas, 2013; Gudynas, 2011; Lang, 2013; Pearson, 2009; Escobar, 2012). The common factor between Latin American and Sindhian Sufic models is that all of these alternative models evolved from the bottom, from the grass roots, from below and from within indigenous peasant communities. These models evolved through micro-political process in which indigenous peasant communities struggled for their indigenous rights. These struggles eventually materialized in form of changes in political regimes, national constitutions, legal and administrative systems of Latin American countries. Emergence of such

powerful struggles and their combined trans-local impact on the national regimes is, however, yet to be realized in Sindh and in Pakistan.

### **From ‘Food Security’ and ‘Food Sovereignty’ to ‘Food Autonomy’**

Transnational peasant movement, to counter neoliberal notion of ‘food security’, initially proposed and propagated the notion of ‘food sovereignty’ which aims the giving nation-states the right to grow and sell the food into the market independent of the pressure from global market system. Impact of food prices on poor classes, and the capitalist accumulation of surpluses remains no longer relevant as food sovereignty movement assess the impact of food prices, taking into consideration wide range of variables, in relation to its impact on demographic, ecological, social and cultural pathologies brought about by neoliberalism.

The ontology of the food sovereignty movement critiques the reductionism and false promises of neoliberalism, positing a practice and a future beyond the liberal development subject, and the science of profit. This emerging ontology is grounded in a process of revaluing agriculture, rurality and food as essential to general social and ecological sustainability, beginning with a recharged peasantry... Defending the peasant way is not just about preserving a ‘culture’, but strengthening cultural practices committed to transcending the subordination of food and agriculture to the price form. In so doing, the food sovereignty movement asserts the incommensurability of diverse agri- and food-cultures with a monocultural exchange-value regime that objectifies food, incorporating its production, and consumption, into the process of capital accumulation in general. (McMichael 2008, p. 213-15)

Agrarian question gets shifted from the problematic of nation-building, though that shift is or was partial, to that of global political-economy. Transnational global market trends, in fact, confounded path-dependent progressive unilineal national development policies. (McMichael 2008, p. 210-11,12) Food security aims at 'feeding the world' through market access and food surpluses generated in the North. Whereas food sovereignty movement argues, in contrast, family-farm

and peasant-based production for domestic purposes, which is, in fact, responsible for 90 percent of the world's food production. (McMichael 2008, p. 216) The 'food sovereignty' regime functions on the principle of plural economy;

...with an expanded role for the state, which participates through state companies in mining, industry, food and services, controlling the industrialization of natural resources to overcome dependence on raw materials exports, achieve food sovereignty and transform the productive matrix (mode of production) in harmony with nature" (Alcoreza 2013, p. 156)

To counter the hegemonic neoliberal transnational onslaught on the sovereignty of the nation-states, 'food sovereignty' model served national and peasant's interests best. But it seemed problematized in case of multinational, multi-ethnic and ecologically diverse countries such as Brazil, India and Indonesia. "Food sovereignty' itself is a problematic term, as it evokes protectionism" (Michael 2008, p. 220) at nation-state level.

Essentially, 'food sovereignty' serves to appropriate and reframe dominant discourse, as a mobilizing slogan, and as a political tactic to gain traction in the international political-economy to a global moral economy organized around 'cooperative advantage' – as a counterpoint to 'comparative advantage' and its licensing of corporate manipulation of the state system and world economy as a chessboard for accumulation. *en routefree*" (Michael 2008, p. 220)

Hence, feeling that the notion of 'food sovereignty' was also insufficient and could undermine the right of contextually different ecological and geographical peasant communities and ethnic groups, and could lead to the extraction of natural resources and minerals, and the cultivation of the capital intensive crops to maximize national growth and income, it has been recently discarded, at least theoretically, and the newer alternative concept of 'food autonomy' evolved.

In Colombia for instance, movements prefer to use *autonomiaalimentaria* (food autonomy) which is somewhat different to food sovereignty. Food sovereignty tends to put the emphasis on the national level, so a county might say we basically produce food for the population blah blah blah, that's not good

enough. There has to be food autonomy locally, regionally, nationally. (Escobar, 'Alternatives to development': an interview with Arturo Escobar, 2012)

'Food autonomy' means the right of the ecological community to grow the food of its choice, with the self-chosen, time-tested methods taking care of the environmental hazards largely through indigenous and locally evolved means and ways. The notion of 'food autonomy' is contrary, both nation-states monopolizing discourse, and to the neo-liberal policies that prioritize international trade over 'food for people', increase dependence on agricultural imports, and strengthen industrialization of agriculture, thus jeopardizing genetic, environmental, cultural and ecological health of the ecological niches, communities, places or locations, micro-societies and geographical regions (Mc Michael 2008, p. 210-11,12; Escobar, 2001). For instance, although export of agricultural items have increased over the years in Pakistan, the relative prices at farm gate for actual peasants did not increase, and the real incomes stagnated putting peasants under further debt or in the condition of social and economic incapacitation.

International Peasant Movement, which is in the shaping, aims at identifying itself with the 'global civil society' which itself is in formative stages. It is confirmed by the...

[La] Via Campesina's uncompromising opposition to state complicity in the neoliberal project (including its opposition to G-20 'trade' politics at Cancun), and political goal of 're-territorializing' states from within ('agrarian citizenship'), and from without, through multilateral institutions dedicated to fair trade and global justice, (Michael 2008, p. 220)

Hence, as it is evident from the above passage, Latin American indigenous communities and ethnic groups elsewhere in the world had started questioning the global aid-community's axiomatic terms, such as, 'development' and 'growth' in 1990s, yet such a kind of problematisation is yet to be anticipated in South Asian developing countries such as Pakistan that heavily depend on donor-led 'development'.

## **Conclusion**

From the above intersecting local-cum-transnational analysis, it is evident that agrarian relations are being transformed beyond the scope of modernity theories or the Marxist stages of evolutionary development. The issue that concerns indigenous peasant communities most in this neo-liberal regime and post-liberal globalizing world is that of 'food autonomy' instead of mere economic land reforms. They are demanding 'food autonomy' as their basic demand to ensure communal-peasantivist autonomy for place-based ecological communities. Keeping the notion of 'food autonomy' and the establishment of communal agrarian regimes in perspective, peasant activists in Sindh, not only have to remain informed about the theoretical and ideological positioning of trans-local peasant communities, but have also to streamline and adapt their peasantivist agendas with transnational peasant movements through sustained activism. But, peasant activist in Sindh have yet to devise their own contextually compatible plan of the level and strength that could penetrate the feudal regime and break it from within to create space for the marginalized. The breakage of the exploitative structures could be achieved if peasant activists, for instance, do not simply attempt to emancipate peasants from bondage, to raise the social status of the marginalized according to the standards setup by the dominant classes, but instead they should setup their own indigenously creative standards. They should not look towards the dominant feudals or landlords for recognition by adopting their standards, values, but provide with alternative thinking, alternative values as vigorous and valuable as that of the dominant ones.

Peasant activists, however, on their part, can evolve from within peasant communities more vigorous peasant organizations or communal councils. Sufic-socialist alternative can serve as the local reflection of "the indigenous cosmovision of co-existence with nature, and as the integral part of the worldview of every ecological community, and thus could be interconnected and networked with transnational and trans-local global moral agrarian regimes. Therefore, it would be desirable for peasant activists of Sindh to pursue that trans-localizing and trans-nationalizing course to make it an integral part of peasantivist, communal political agenda.

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