

**POPULOUS, PRECARIOUS – PROTECTED?
THE PARADOX OF SOCIAL SECURITY
FOR SOUTH ASIAN AGRICULTURAL WORKERS¹**

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Abstract

Social security is firmly rising on the international agenda. Discourses that depart from the assumption that societies can only afford a certain level of social expenditure give way to a recognition that social security is an important investment in development. New interventions in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan express this changing vision and a larger commitment on the part of the state.

This increased emphasis on the need to provide social security is appropriate, if not long overdue, given the grave insecurities that large parts of the populations of these countries experience. However, the new weight that social security has gained in national discourses also brings to light a paradox: While the state is supposed to protect people against vulnerabilities, these very vulnerabilities seem to be created or reinforced by manifestations of economic and political regimes. While this paradox has been identified earlier, its understanding is poor and has yet to be reflected in measures to provide income and employment security. This is an important gap in our understanding of social security that I address with the paper in the context of South Asian agricultural workers.

The paper takes the paradoxical role of the state in both creating insecurities and having the means to alleviate them as its starting point. It aims to understand the expressions of this paradox in the life and work of agricultural workers in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan from a political economy perspective. Polanyi's (1965 [1944]) theorisation of a 'double movement' towards both commodification and protection that characterises the situation of labour in market societies provides an analytical starting point.

1. Paradigm shift and paradox in social security thinking

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Social security is firmly rising on the international agenda. Conceptual and policy discourses that depart from the assumption that societies can only afford a certain level of social expenditure give way to a recognition that social security is an important investment in long-term development (G20 2011, ILO and WHO 2009, Kannan 2007, Szreter 2007, Townsend 2009). After a period of celebration of the role of non-state actors, the pendulum has swung back to an acknowledgement that the primary responsibility for the provision of social security lies with the state, given its financial and administrative resources. Social security systems are understood here as collective remedies against adversity and deficiency (de Swaan 1988: 2). The South Asian countries Bangladesh, India and Pakistan are cases in point². New legislation, policies and programmes in all three countries express this changing vision and a larger commitment on the part of the state. Social security initiatives, such as the Indian Mahatma Gandhi National Rural Employment Guarantee Act (NREGA) and the Bangladesh Employment Generation for the Hardcore Poor (EGHP), are celebrated as landmark pieces of legislation (IFAD 2010: 106) and flagship interventions (Khatun et al. 2010: 6). Pakistan's new cash transfer scheme, the Benazir Income Support Programme (BISP), is said to signal a 'paradigm shift' in the country's social security policies (Gazdar 2011).

This increased emphasis on the need to provide social security is appropriate, if not long overdue, given the grave insecurities that large parts of the populations of these countries experience. While South Asia is home to about a quarter of the world's population, the region hosts half of the world's poor (Alkire and Santos 2010: 4). The vast majority of them live in rural areas (IFAD 2010: 47) and belong to the category of working poor – often with agriculture as the mainstay of their livelihood (ILO 2011a: 46f). However, the new weight that social security has gained in national discourses also brings to light a paradox, namely, that the state is supposed to protect people against vulnerabilities, while these very vulnerabilities seem to be created or reinforced by local manifestations of existing economic and political regimes. The state is understood here as “a set of political, administrative and coercive institutions and organisations, headed and more or less well-coordinated by an executive authority – the government” (Majumdar and Mooij 2011: 44). These paradoxes have been identified earlier (e.g. Majumdar and Mooij 2011, Sayeed 2004, Wood 2003). For instance, IFAD's “Rural Poverty Report 2011” for the first time recognises that the state itself can represent a source of risk for rural populations (IFAD 2010: 97ff). However, this has not included their analysis and has yet to be reflected in the discussion of measures to provide income and employment security. This is an important gap in our understanding of social security that I intend to address with the present paper in the context of South Asian agricultural workers.

The paper takes the paradoxical role of the state as its starting point. It aims to understand the expressions of this paradox in the life and work of agricultural workers in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan from a political economy perspective. Polanyi's (1965) theorisation of a 'double movement' towards both

² In the context of this paper, South Asia mostly refers to these three most populous countries of the region.

commodification and protection that characterises the situation of labour in market societies provides an analytical starting point. This lens is employed to examine semi-structured group and individual interviews, conducted between July and November 2011 in Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Participants in these explorative conversations were agricultural workers as well as key informants from academia, trade unions, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and international organisations. This paper focuses on agricultural workers' perspectives, though. Interviews with agricultural workers were conducted in various districts of the Sindh province of Pakistan and the Dhaka and Rangpur divisions of Bangladesh. Guided by thematic analysis, the field notes and transcripts from interviews were labelled with codes that aimed to identify experiences of agricultural workers' insecurity and security as well as their respective sources.

2. South Asia's agricultural precariat

The focus on South Asian agricultural workers is motivated by the grave vulnerabilities that this major group within the labour force experiences. In Bangladesh, India and Pakistan, approximately half of the workforce is employed in agriculture (FAO 2011), totalling about 350 million workers (ILO 2011a: 68). 'Agricultural workers' refer to all those who are economically active in agriculture, and hence comprises of both self-employed peasants and landowner-employers, tenants, as well as labourers, paid as well as unpaid. Medium and large landowners are much less insecure³. Agricultural work across the South Asian subcontinent displays distinct gender features. There is a high concentration of women's work in agriculture. In India, for example, at the beginning of the 2000s, about 60 per cent of all agricultural operations were conducted by women (van Klaveren et al. 2010: 59).

The fact that those working in South Asian agriculture are overrepresented amongst the poor (Orden et al. 2008: 103, Hossain 2004: 7, Desai et al. 2010: 34) clearly reflects their lack of adequate income-earning opportunities.

Employment insecurity for wage workers in agriculture is more pronounced than in other sectors due to the seasonal nature of agriculture. In many poor regions of South Asia, this leads to wide-spread agricultural underemployment and income crises. Interviewees in Bangladesh's poor northwest reported that agricultural work is largely available during the four harvest months. During the other eight slack months (*monga*), they find work only during 7-10 days per month (interview East Sotho Rauta 2011). Besides, informal arrangements such as daily wage and piece-rate contracts with wage workers are dominant (Desai et al. 2010: 41ff, Maligalig et al. 2009: 19, Siegmann and Shaheen 2008: 622ff). Employment insecurity also affects tenants. The results of interviews I held in Sindh, Pakistan support research by Gazdar and Mallah (2010) in revealing the precariousness of sharecroppers' position vis-à-vis landowners if they question whether the harvests' costs and revenues have been shared according to their tenancy contracts (interviews Jaffar Leghari, Sakrand 2011). Their income insecurity is reflected in the fact that agricultural labourers' average wages of have been significantly below the statutory minimum wage (MHHDC 2004: 178).

³ Therefore, their situation is not the focus of the present paper.

The macro-economic framework in South Asia since the 1990s with its increased emphasis on trade liberalisation has been associated with another set of income insecurities. Labour-intensive crop production has been replaced with cheaper imports. Both these and more capital-intensive technologies have posed risks to agricultural employment (MHHDC 2010: 35). In India, between 1998 and 2004, underemployment in agriculture increased widely. In a number of agricultural areas, employment measured in hours declined by 20 percentage points to 77% (van Klaveren et al. 2010: 58). Rising costs of imported inputs in combination with reduced subsidies as well as lower prices for their produce has squeezed the earnings of peasants and tenants (MHHDC 2010: 35). These processes have been paralleled by a move towards more market-based labour relations. Sharecropping arrangements, i.e. land-rental contracts in which the landlord and the tenant share the crop, which are still wide-spread in Pakistan as well as other forms of tenancy have increasingly given way to wage labour (e.g. Lohano and Copestake 2010: 9). Bangladesh is an exceptional case where export-oriented manufacturing in the garment industry has generated millions of jobs for young women from rural areas who did not participate in the paid labour market before.

Workers in agriculture face serious health hazards. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) lists the sector as one of the three most hazardous industries globally (ILO 2009). Pesticide poisoning is a source of chronic illness amongst agricultural workers across the region (Dasgupta et al. 2007, Mancini et al. 2005, Srinivas Rao et al. 2005, Siegmann and Shaheen 2008: 625f). Ill-health is a major reason for indebtedness in the region, closing the cycle between social and economic vulnerabilities.

Finally, the lack of legal protection of the agricultural workforce has been identified as major obstacle for voice and representation of agricultural workers especially in Bangladesh and Pakistan (Al Faruque 2010: 33, Pegler et al. 2011: 117).

Agricultural workers' insecurities contrast sharply with the fact that they are generally ignored by social security systems. The right to social security is enshrined in the constitutions of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Yet, so far, only a small number of government employees and formal economy workers are able to access this right (Kabeer 2009: 24) – excluding the large agricultural precariat.

3. Paradigm shift in policies for social security?

However, as mentioned above, recent years have seen a sea change. A number of legislative and policy initiatives in the area of social security have emerged from the Indian sub-continent. First and foremost, they address employment and income insecurity. India has been pioneering this development with the establishment of a legal entitlement to 100 days of rural employment, remunerated at the minimum wage, with the NREGA. Similarly, in Bangladesh a number of employment guarantee schemes have been implemented (Khatun et al. 2010). The EGHP is the largest amongst them. It targets those characterised by a high degree of employment insecurity (Khatun et al. 2010: 11). The cash transfer programme BISP in Pakistan, which is aimed primarily at poor women

and provides them with a monthly cash income, has led to a nearly six-fold increase in fiscal allocations for transfer programmes (Gazdar 2011: 61). All three schemes are of great importance for agricultural workers and have pronounced gender features: While NREGA and EGHP directly target rural workers and establish a minimum quota for female participants, BISP beneficiaries are solely women, including a high share of agricultural workers.

The effectiveness of these interventions has been discussed critically. The BISP design has received praise for its gender-sensitivity (Gazdar 2011: 80, Khan and Qutub 2010: 23), for being an example of evidence-based policy-making (Khan and Qutub 2010: 4) and for its well-defined targeting (Gazdar 2011: 65). However, Khan and Qutub (2010: 3) also point out that political motives were the main driving force behind the BISP launch. Resultantly, political clientelism and outright corruption have often characterised implementation (Khan and Qutub 2010: 15ff). What is more, observers have questioned whether the limited BISP transfers will be able to compensate for the rise in wheat prices that the government announced that hit the net food consuming landless labourers and marginal farmers hardest (Amjad 2010: 3f, Boquérat 2009: 13). Similarly, the contradiction between good design and poor implementation of the employment guarantee schemes in Bangladesh and India have repeatedly been pointed out. The EGHP has been found to be controlled by political agents (Khatun et al. 2010: 16, Barkat et al. 2011: 35f), leading to interference by parliamentarians to meet their constituency needs (Zaman 2011: 273). In general, while the implementation of NREGA has been investigated thoroughly and critically during the past years (e.g. Afridi 2008, CAG 2007, Shariff 2009, Sudarshan et al. 2010), few studies are available on EGHP and BISP.

With Munck (2004: 252) one may ask, therefore, whether these initiatives, from a Polanyian perspective, can be seen as efforts to re-embed labour in society and as the development of a 'compromise state' after a period during which markets have increasingly been freed from restrictions set by society or local communities.

4. Commodification and protection of South Asia's agricultural workers – contradictory experiences

The interview data show that the new interventions for employment and income security so far do not represent effective tools for agricultural workers' social security. Workers sarcastically point to contradiction between the promised and actual benefits of schemes for agricultural workers' protection.

Overall, three broad types of such inconsistencies have been identified. They arise from contradictions between different levels of the state – something labelled 'double speak' by Mooij (2007: 335), between different roles of state representatives as well as from the conflicting influence of the state in different domains of policy-making, e.g. between shaping welfare and economic regimes.

Most agricultural workers interviewed in Pakistan were aware of the BISP and/or have tried to apply for it. However, a shared experience is that the access to the programme is mediated by factors other than the eligibility criteria.

Sharecroppers in Sanghar district points out that, while formal selection criteria exist, it is de facto the MNAs and MPAs who decide about the allocation of application forms (interview Jaffar Leghari 2011). A member of a poor Bheel Hindu family in the same village report no programme benefits thus far, despite their eligibility and the correct submission of required documentation. He relates this to political influence and corruption and narrates the case of a programme for the (free) provision of handpumps. In order to obtain a pump, though, he had to pay a bribe of Rs. 2000. According to key informant Karamat Ali, this way the programme actually strengthens feudal power (interview Ali, July 15, 2011).

While especially in the *monga*-prone northwest of Bangladesh, public initiatives for employment security in Bangladesh are reported to be women's only income-generating employment opportunity outside agriculture, the interviewed women workers also underline how difficult the access to public schemes is. One women narrates that when she heard that the Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) cards, that allow access to food grain rations for the most vulnerable women, are available, she went to the local council office (*union parishad*). She actually had to go four times in order to obtain her card. Another worker gets very agitated due to the nepotism and corruption involved in allocating benefits of public schemes:

“The members and chairman of the *union parishad* come up for the richest people, not for poor people. They provide all facilities for the richest people, say, for example, the VGD card and Food for Works, all are distributed amongst the richest people and to those who are related to the *union parishad* chairman and members – nothing for us, nothing for anything from the government, we still don't see anything! If we demand a VGD card from the *union parishad*, they demand 1,000-1,500 taka as a bribe. But we can't provide that money, so we don't get any facility from the government.” (interview East Sotho Rauta 2011)

The fact that many feudal landlords represent the population in Pakistan's national and provincial parliaments is an example for the accumulation of state representatives' political, economic and social roles. In large parts of Pakistan, landowners provide land for cultivation as well as for housing. Asked whether people complain about landlords' practices, which unlawfully shift the burden of cultivation costs to the sharecropper, male agricultural workers explain that those who complain or resist are being evicted from the land on which they live. Of course, they also can no longer cultivate the same landlord's land and hence lose their source of livelihood besides their home (interview Jaffar Leghari). Hence, the risk of eviction from their residential land keeps agricultural workers' bargaining power low and makes their employment and income precarious (Gazdar and Mallah 2010). This threat is underpinned by the significant political power the landowning classes in Pakistan wield. Agricultural workers report that large landowners collude with the state's executive and judicial organs, such as the police, bureaucracy and courts. The collusion consists of landowners submitting false cases against sharecroppers in case of complaints against illegal practices, class-based court rulings favouring feudal landowners, etc. (interviews Jaffar Leghari, Sakrand 2011). Resultantly, the implementation of existing laws

for the protection of agricultural workers, such as the Sindh Tenancy Act 1950, is ineffective.

A more indirect role of the state in mediating insecurities rather than protection can be discerned in the sphere of the market. While subsidies for agricultural inputs have been withdrawn in South Asia in the name of deregulation, subsidies to the affluent go unquestioned (Kabeer 2009: 24). Tenants in central Bangladesh repeatedly referred to the resulting market volatilities as the greatest hazards they face (interview Goborbhanpur 2011). Interestingly, in this flood-prone context, agricultural workers rated the risks emanating from rising input prices higher than natural hazards (interviews Phulkot, Goborbhanpur 2011). While feudal power relations have been weakened through land reforms since independence in India and Bangladesh, yet, this has led to the importation of market-related risks for agricultural workers (interview Joshi 2011). Some protective measures, such as subsidies for agricultural inputs like fertiliser and water are still in place in Bangladesh, but their implementation is ineffective (interview Goborbhanpur 2011). As a last resort, tenants might have to sell their land and commoditise their labour. For wage labourers, though, insecurities regarding access to employment and food are even higher (interview East Sotho Rauta 2011). Observers of rural change in Pakistan pointed out that the patron-client relationship between sharecropper and landlord in rural Sindh previously also involved a certain degree of protection, which has come to an end with greater prevalence of commodified labour relations (interview Shah 2011). Peasants and sharecroppers in Pakistan often have to access loans in order to cover expenditure, e.g. for agricultural inputs, between harvests (interview Hussain 2011). Sharecroppers in Shaheed Benazirabad district in Pakistan, who seasonally work in a sugar mill, narrate that expenses in agriculture are very high, implying that, whatever they cultivate, sharecroppers are continuously indebted to the landlord (interview Sakrand 2011). Small and marginal farmers as well as landless labourers across the subcontinent are net buyers of food. Hence, if market prices of food are going up without a matching rise in output prices and wages then their income and food security is endangered (interview Joshi 2011). The extension of commercial agriculture in South Asia, including the greater degree of commodification of labour, has not been the result of external interference. It has been the result of state decisions about intervention or withdrawal from certain realms of politics. This is reflected in how agricultural workers themselves perceived the causes of their insecurities. Female agricultural workers in northwest Bangladesh as well as key informants in Pakistan saw the reason for indebtedness and labour bondage in the lack of free public health care (interviews East Sotho Rauta 2011, interview Shah 2011). If they cannot repay loans to cover health care expenses to money lenders, they have to work on their land. Also, in order to access credit, some people sell their labour in advance for a low rate (interview East Sotho Rauta 2011).

Wood (2003: 455) gets to the heart of these contradictory situations by stating that most governments fail to provide social security “[...] because they and their supporters are implicated in reproducing the social, economic and political conditions which create the uncertainty and insecurity barriers to that movement” towards more security. Adequate conceptual frameworks to

understand the paradoxes of social security that agricultural workers encounter have to enable us to understand how and why state-labour relations result in workers' insecurity and/or security. Polanyi's (1965) notion of a 'double movement' of market societies – both commodifying and protecting labour – may provide a fruitful starting point.

5. Commodification and protection of labour: Polanyi's 'double movement'

Polanyi's (1965) historical analysis identified the cause of the collapse of 19th century European civilisation in the effort to set up a self-regulating market system (Polanyi 1965: 29f). Such an institutional pattern, he insisted, could not function unless society was subordinated to its requirements (Polanyi 1965: 71). They included the commodification of all factors of production, including 'fictitious commodities' such as labour, land, and money. A fictitious commodity is an essential factor of production, which was never meant to be commodified and whose commodification destroys its essential character. For instance, turning labour into an object of exchange destroys its productive capacity (Burawoy 2010: 310).

Polanyi (1965: 46) emphasises the embeddedness of the economy in social relationships as every single step in the process of production and distribution of goods is geared to a number of social interests. Life itself is not sustained by market forces, but is reproduced socially in households, communities and societies (Webster et al. 2008: 4). This conceptualisation is in line with the feminist argument that labour is embodied (Paton 2010: 82). Resultantly, Polanyi (1965: 73) discerns commodification of fictitious commodities as both being integral part of, but simultaneously causing the destruction of market society. He illustrates the destructive effects of commodification with discussions of a range of sectoral experiences from England. A rationalisation of agriculture associated with commodified agricultural labour antedated the industrial revolution as a source of insecurity as rural populations' access to non-wage income was made difficult. Similarly, industrial workers experienced severe employment insecurity in which "workers who are today fully employed may be tomorrow in the streets begging for bread" (Polanyi 1965: 92).

This threat to the fabric of society generates "spontaneous counter-movements to defend society" (Burawoy 2010: 301). Polanyi's theoretical framework therefore embeds the market economy in a wider 'market society', including legislation and regulation enforced by the state (Polanyi 1965: 139ff). He (1965: 127) distinguishes between state and society with the state being able to perform intervention designed to avert harm from the community, but not in a position to organise society. The state hence fulfils an ambiguous role in market society, summarised in the notion of a 'double movement' (130). It provides supportive methods to both the opposing organising principles in a market society, namely to economic liberalism and to social protection: Legislation to liberalise trade and to protect the workforce from the deleterious effects of a market economy originated from the same state actors (Polanyi 1965: 132).

While – in his eurocentric analysis - Polanyi assumed that this 'double movement' was a singular characteristic of the transformation of the 19th

century in Europe, Burawoy (2010) points out that since the writing of “The Great Transformation” renewed cycles of marketization have been discerned. He identifies a “complex intertwining of marketization and counter-movements, but with no definite end in sight” (2010: 307) and urges to take a global perspective for the investigation of the ongoing cycle of marketization (310).

6. Discussion and conclusion

In order to relate the contradictory experiences of South Asian agricultural workers to Polanyi’s notion of the ‘double movement’ that market societies perform, a few questions deserve consideration, namely: (i) Are agricultural workers’ vulnerabilities related to the commodification of their labour? (ii) Can interventions for income and employment security be considered efforts to re-embed labour into society? And, finally, (iii) does Polanyi’s ‘double movement’ explain the contradictory experiences of agricultural workers – i.e. the ambiguous role of the state in mediating both their insecurity and security?

The experiences of agricultural workers in Bangladesh and Pakistan outlined above indeed include severe insecurities that relate to marketisation. Markets for inputs have been liberalised including the removal of subsidies for agricultural inputs, leading to more volatile and higher expenses for peasants and tenants. Output prices fluctuate more in an institutional environment where price boards for major crops have been abolished and where output prices for agricultural products depends on world market demand. As reported above, tenants and peasants in Bangladesh and Pakistan perceive these risks emanating from liberalised agricultural markets as major threats to their livelihoods. Resulting income and food insecurity may, in extreme cases, force them to sell their land and rely on wage labour. Parallels can be drawn between the Poor Law Amendment 1834 in England, discussed in detail in Polanyi’s (1965: 77ff) work, that paved the way to the establishment of a market for wage labour and the move away from sharecropping in Pakistan and Bangladesh towards wage labour relations. They were catalysed both by directly geared towards liberalisation of agricultural markets, but also by state disengagement from social sectors, such as health care. Commercial agriculture undermines non-wage sources of income and, resultantly, weakens agricultural workers’ bargaining power (Webster et al. 2008: 13). The preceding sections have shown that this process has taken place in South Asia, too.

The emerging image is not so clear-cut, though. Increased marketisation and export orientation in Bangladesh has also opened avenues for diversification away from agriculture, e.g. through wage employment in garment factories. While, as explained, the agricultural employment that people leave behind has also been increasingly marketised, industrial employment draws more than proportionately on a workforce whose labour had – by and large - not yet been commodified, namely young female workers. How does that relate to (in)security? Labour migration for industrial employment, e.g. for work in garment factories in Bangladesh, is indicative of the expansion of the market economy. While diversification may contribute to migrants’ family’s income security, it also involves greater exposure to new risks, such as demand volatilities in garments trade. However, Kabeer et al. (2011) and others (Khattak

and Sayeed 2000) have emphasised the empowering effect of work outside home for women whose mobility has been curtailed in the context of social norms prevalent in South Asia.

The preceding sections have shown that public interventions for income and employment security cannot be seen as effective efforts to re-embed labour into society in the sense of redressing the insecurities agricultural workers experience. This is due to their embeddedness in local social relations, e.g. patronage and patriarchy that lead to political influence and corruption in the allocation of the benefits of public schemes.

It is precisely this 'double speak' between state regulation as well as public schemes and their implementation that Polanyi's 'double movement' of commodification and protection does address. It relates to the different principles that the state in market societies adheres to, namely both economic liberalism and social protection. The perspectives from South Asia form the basis of a more fine-grained analysis of how the contradictory experiences caused by the 'double movement' takes place. It may involve different state actors influencing different policy domains, such as trade and social policy. The tension between the two of them is overcome in a varied manner. In Bangladesh, for instance, a residualist approach is followed. It lets markets 'work efficiently', aiming to mitigate 'transitional pain' through safe nets. Actors at different levels of the state might show different levels of commitment to the protection of the labour force. The examples from Bangladesh and Pakistan show that it is exactly the way interventions are socially embedded that poses challenges to their effectiveness. Even legislation establishing agricultural workers' rights, such as the Sindh Tenancy Act, is subject to interpretation through feudal landlords. This is underpinned by the political power they wield as parliamentarians. But while, as landowners, they represent an interest in market extension, as political actors they are eager to garner votes. The implementation of a public scheme like the BISP might be a method to achieve that goal.

But, while Polanyi accords some analytically useful ambiguity to the state, the market and, especially, society are treated as monolithic black boxes. This is problematic because, as indicated above, the social relations that Polanyi idealises might also have a role to play in the reproduction of workers' insecurities. For instance, he does not problematise the gendered hierarchies and feudal power structures in which those were embedded. Others have pointed out Polanyi's undertheorisation of society, but mostly in respect to the question who the bearers of counter-movements towards society's protection are (e.g. Burawoy 2010: 302, Munck 2004: 253, Webster et al. 2008: 5ff). The question whether Polanyi applies a naïve notion of social relations from which marketisation disembeds labour has not been asked.

Alternatively, the emergence and the growth of South Asia's agricultural precariat can be understood as resulting from the intersection of local social structures and global economic dynamics, just emphasising the role of social relations in marketisation: Social marginalisation based on, amongst others, gender, caste and class, that takes places outside the labour market has been

identified as a 'social structure of accumulation' that weakens the bargaining power of specific segments of workers and channels them into specific, typically marginalised positions in the labour market (Harriss-White 2003: 13ff, Mezzadri 2008, Siegmann and Shaheen 2008). These local processes can be linked to an economic regime that instrumentalises the marginalized position of the rural workforce and the resulting low labour costs for securing macro-economic competitiveness (Pegler et al. 2011). This may explain the high concentration of poorly paid women, migrants, members of low caste communities as well as ethnic and religious minorities in the most labour-intensive tasks in agricultural production in South Asia. While such a conceptualisation emphasises the instrumentalisation of social relations, Polanyi, in contrast, discerns their break-up for commodification. His perspective raises the question how the strengthening of feudal relations in Pakistan in the process of greater marketization of labour can be explained and whether the commodification of women's labour for factory work in Bangladesh is such a bad thing.

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- Interviews (individual & group) with Karamat Ali, Executive Director, Pakistan Institute for Labour Education and Research (PILER), Karachi, Pakistan, July 15, 2011 & July 16, 2011
- Interviews with groups of female and male agricultural workers in East Sotho Rauta, Domar Upazila, Niphamari district, Bangladesh, November 18, 2011
- interviews with BRAC female and male tenant farmers groups in Goborbhanpur, Bogra, Bangladesh, August 5, 2011
- Interview with Altaf Hussain, Research Associate, PILER, Hyderabad, Pakistan, July 19, 2011
- Interview with groups of female and male agricultural workers in Jaffar Leghari, Sinjhora taluka, Sanghar district, Pakistan, July 20, 2011
- Interview with PK Joshi, Director, International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) South Asia, Delhi, July 29, 2011
- Interview with BRAC female tenant farmers group in Phulkot, Bogra, Bangladesh, August 6, 2011
- Interview with workers, union delegates and manager in Sakrand Sugar Mills, Sakrand, Shaheed Benazirabad district, July 21, 2011
- Interview with Zulfiqar Shah, Joint Director, PILER, Karachi, Pakistan, July 16, 2011