

Gallup Pakistan History Project - Weekend Read 4 ‘Agriculture, not schools’: by
Murad Javed (Research Fellow, Gallup Pakistan History Project)

In post-colonial states, the twin forces of industrialization and urbanization have unleashed their transformative effects to varying degrees. While some states have successfully moved ahead at a dizzying pace with their industrialization and urbanization projects, others have remained laggards in this ubiquitous spread of glocalized neoliberalism. The bedding of modernity, industrialization, and urbanization almost inevitably triggers radical changes in social relations, cultural institutions, political systems, and most crucially, economic modes of production and their attendant socio-political, and cultural structures. A key feature of this transformation is the displacement of the socio-economic universe of rural existence. All states have gone through these changes. And all post-colonial states have enacted these transformations to varying degrees and intensities.

In Pakistan, the degree of shift in modes of production from villages towards cities and industries has taken root at an uneven pace. While large urban metropolises dominate the national horizon and discourse, the bulk of Pakistan’s population still resides in villages, and those peculiarly nebulous sites, town-villages – where the population exceeds 5,000 residents, and the locality mimics both villages and small cities in equal measure. The demographic distribution in Pakistan is a key to understanding the social, cultural, political, and economic realities of its citizens. While much of this contemporary mapping is made available by a variety of databases and sources, it is particularly fascinating to travel back in Pakistan’s history, and peruse through data on the socioeconomic opinions and preferences of Pakistanis. This traveling back in time for a snapshot is made possible by a rare and valued survey conducted by Gallup Pakistan in 1979 with a nationally representative sample. The survey asked respondent the main problem of their village/locality.

In response to this prompt, an overwhelming proportion of Pakistanis – 59% - converged around identifying their most critical concern: problems related to agriculture. This option was selected by the outright majority of Pakistanis across the country, and provides a window into the state of affairs in Pakistan more than 35 years ago. That finding reaffirms the commonly-held wisdom that most Pakistanis have always lived in villages and rural areas dispersed across the country.

Traditional agriculture in Pakistan is a definitively rural mode of production. That 59% of all Pakistanis claimed that agricultural issues were the most important problem in their locality bears out this reality. 32 years from independence (in 1979), Pakistanis were still relatively firmly affixed in the dominance of agriculture as the primary mode/activity of economic production and consumption in the country.

This finding necessitates reading the context to understand why agricultural problems remained the most important problem faced by the outright majority of Pakistanis. For most Pakistanis in 1979, agriculture was vitally significant as a means to generating livelihood. This begs the question: why was agriculture so critically significant for the majority of Pakistanis? Two broad answers come to mind when thinking of the structural evolution in Pakistan's economy between 1947 and 1979. Under the aegis of an international push, Pakistan was a key battleground for the progenitors and supporters of the Green Revolution. By the late 1950s and early 1960s, the newly-minted, post-colonial states in South, East, and Southeast Asia were posing a major challenge for humanity: with the bulk of the global population residing in this region, traditional methods of agricultural production were increasingly outpaced by a rapid increase in population sizes. Chronic hunger, food-shortages, malnutrition, and droughts were threatening to unleash a global humanitarian tragedy never before witnessed in history. Pakistan became a key battleground for introducing Borlaug-inspired innovative solutions to obdurate agricultural challenges, and modern agricultural practices. Specifically rolled out in the 1960s under President Ayub Khan's regime, Pakistan's version of the Green Revolution added tremendous growth and expansion within the agriculture productivity, thereby making the sector a vital source of income and livelihoods for the millions associated with farming in rural areas.

The next decade, 1970s, saw a different transformation in Pakistan. Under Prime Minister Bhutto, Pakistan's oscillation towards socialism saw the Government of Pakistan undertake wholesale nationalization of major industries and services. This program of nationalizing industries placed a fetter on expansion in industrial and services output, thereby limiting alternative economic opportunities and channels of production. This development must have played a crucial role in restricting people in rural areas, and binding them closer to agriculture as the most important source of income-generation.

Thus, it comes as no surprise that in the context of these changes, the majority of Pakistanis found sustenance through agriculture, and pointed to agricultural problems as the most important problem of their village/locality. This number also shows that in its march towards modernity, by 1979, Pakistan was still firmly a laggard in terms of industrialization and urbanization.

After agriculture, the other most significant problem identified by the people of Pakistan was Health Facilities. 16% Pakistanis identified health facilities as a major problem in their villages/localities. Though overshadowed by agricultural problems, the absence or dysfunction of health facilities was a problem for many Pakistanis. Unfortunately, in 2014, one cannot claim that health facilities, services, and resources have improved markedly in the country. For many Pakistanis, health-related facilities and services are still a major problem.

Perhaps, the most interesting reading of this survey is found in what was not identified as a significant problem by most Pakistanis in 1979. Only 2% of all Pakistanis claimed that education was a major problem in their area. This remarkably low interest in the state of affairs in education shows that by 1979, though still largely lacking education, most Pakistanis still did not view education as a problem. This accentuates the fact that education in 1979 remained a low-priority area for most people in Pakistan. What could explain this low proclivity for education? The answer lies in the same survey and the aforementioned discussion: rural agriculture. For most Pakistanis, agriculture in villages was the most important means of livelihood in 1979. In that scheme of things, education was insignificant as a pathway to add value to material circumstances of most Pakistani families attached with agriculture. What mattered was manual labour – an important input into agricultural production, and not schools. While alternative modes of production (industries and services) remained out-of-bounds for most Pakistanis in 1979, education was seen as wholly irrelevant exercise to generating income.

An important feature of Pakistan in 1979 was the relatively low proportion of Pakistanis who identified peace as a problem in their area: only 1% reported peace as an issue. This alludes to the relative domestic stability and order in Pakistan. In sharp contrast, Pakistan in 2014 is changed state, where law and order and peace are increasingly problematic and scarce commodities.

Results from the Gallup survey in 1979 reveals interesting insights into Pakistan's evolution at that point in time. In its march towards modernity, industrialization, and urbanization, Pakistan was a laggard in 1979, still passing through the socioeconomic, cultural, and political transformations that have become a hallmark of modern nation states. These findings provide an interesting snapshot in the story of Pakistan's development.