

The Seyp System: An Institution towards Decline in Rural Pakistan

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Abstract

This paper examines the changing dynamics of labour relations in rural Pakistan that exist in the form of seyp system. Focus group discussions were conducted with the members of landowning and service providing quoms engaged in seyp contract. The study found that the members of service providing quoms are increasingly leaving their caste based occupations resulting in the decline of seyp system. Seyp has become more of an economic relation between seyp is who are less keen to extend their moral and social support towards each other, like in the past. Landowners are losing their caste privileges and control over service providers that they previously exercised through labour relations. Conversely, the reduced economic dependence of service providers on the landowners, as a result of the decline in seyp system, is uplifting the social standing of service providers and thus revitalizing their caste identity.

Keywords: seyp, caste, quom, labour relations, rural Pakistan

I. Introduction

Caste system in rural Pakistan represents the division of society into birth-ascribed status groups, known as quoms and zaats (Lyon, 2004; Usman, 2016). The major caste divisions exist between the landowning quoms and the service providing quoms (Ahmad, 1970; Eglar, 1960). Various landowning quoms associated with cultivation as their parentage occupation are called zamindars such as sjats, rajputs and awans. Members of zamindar quoms residing in villages own land with varying size of their landholdings. On the other hand, members of different service providing quoms such as cobbler, potter, blacksmith, barber, carpenter, weaver, musalli (labourer) are known as kammi. They serve the villagers as labourers and with the occupational crafts associated with their quom that they inherit from their ancestors (Ahmad, 1970; Alavi, 1972; Eglar, 1960). The social relationships between traditional zamindar and kammi quoms are characterized by birth-ascribed status, parentage occupations, endogamy, biradari system (kinship) and labour relations between them (Eglar, 1960; Nadvi and Robinson, 2004; Usman and Amjad, 2013). Various studies suggest that the characteristics of traditional caste system

practiced in rural Pakistan have transformed over time due to the increasing detachment of kammi quoms from their parentage occupations (Usman, 2017). Despite this, the members of kammi quoms are recognized in the village setting through their parentage occupations (Lyon, 2004; Usman, 2011).

The labour relations between zamindar and kammi quoms serve as the most important factor that defines the traditional caste system in rural Punjab (Ahmed, 1980; Eglar, 1960). Different studies conducted on the caste system in Pakistan discuss the interconnectedness of different caste groups in traditional labour relations characterized by their socio economic interdependence (e.g. Barth, 1981; Chaudhary, 1999; Planning Commission, 2003). However, Eglar (1960) provided the most comprehensive description of labour relations in the context of Punjabi villages through the seyp contracts between zamindars and kammis. The seyp system customarily exists in most parts of the Punjab province in Pakistan (Chaudhary, 1999; Lyon, 2004). It is a contractual relationship that is established not between individuals but the families that become seypis to each other (Usman, 2011). Seyp is predominantly a work contract between a zamindar and a kammi household that involves shared mutual obligations between them. Families can enter into a seyp contract at any time and any of the men or women may initiate this contract on behalf of other family members (Eglar, 1960).

In a seyp relationship, the kammi families, alongside their occupational crafts, work as labourers for zamindar families and assist them in their household and agricultural affairs. For instance, barbers are responsible for the haircut of their seypis and also provide them labour at ceremonial occasions in their households, such as weddings, deaths and child birth. In return, kammis receive an annual or seasonal share in crops, fodder for their animals and wood for cooking etc. They receive amount of crops in accordance with the work they performed for zamindars. On ceremonial occasions, kammis receive laag i.e. ceremonial money as gift and payment for cooking along with meal, clothes, grains and sweets. Furthermore, zamindars may call their seypi kammis at the time of need without discussing the amount of work or payment with them. However, the customary payments for work are known to both parties. At times, zamindars may not require the services of their seypi kammis yet they make the minimum payment to maintain the customary seyp relation. Every zamindar family has a seyp contract with different kammi quoms including barber, blacksmith, carpenter, cobbler, potter, baker and musalli. Similarly, seyp relationship exists between kammi households. Like zamindars, a kammi family establishes seyp relationship with number of zamindar and kammi households in the village. Some kammis also enter into a seyp contract in nearby villages in order to earn more income however customarily they do not leave their ancestral village (Eglar, 1960; Usman, 2011).

Seyp system plays a significant role to organize the village life by addressing the basic needs of community. Eglar discussed the traditional responsibilities of seypis towards each other and the nature of work and payment (1960). It is considered as a matter of respect and dignity to maintain a longstanding

seyp relationship. Seyp contract established between two families usually continues over generations. It is not merely an economic relationship but rather a long-lasting moral and social bond between seypis, which is not easily broken and mutual obligations are faithfully fulfilled by either of the parties.

Eglar conducted her study around 50 years ago. Other recent studies suggest that the dynamics of labour relations between zamindar and kammi quoms are changing due to the availability of other labour opportunities e.g. industrial labour. Kammi are leaving their caste occupations (Usman, 2017) and, as a result, the seyp system is towards decline (Hooper and Hamid, 2003; Chaudhary, 1999; Lyon, 2004). This study attempts to investigate the reasons behind the decline of seyp system in Punjabi villages and its effects on village life.

II. Methodology

This study was conducted in the Ferozewala tehsil of district Sheikhpura. Two villages inhabited by the traditional zamindar and kammi quoms were purposively selected, where seyp system is still in practice. The selected villages are located in close proximity to each other and are owned by the Virk Jats. Zamindars of both villages have kinship relations through marriages and constitute biradaris. Kammi quoms residing in the villages are barber, cobbler, carpenter, blacksmith, potter, dindar (sweepers), weaver and mirasi (village bard). The villages consist of approximately 1100 households and 8500 individuals. Zamindars comprise around 75% of the total population, compared with 25% of the kammi. Many kammi households are still engaged in seyp contracts with zamindar households of the village.

Twelve focus group discussions were carried out with the men and the women from landowning and service providing quoms. A discussion guide was designed by listing the major themes and questions to be explored, which revolved around the reasons of decline in caste occupations and seyp system. Purposive sampling technique was used to select the sample by giving representation to zamindar and kammi biradaris residing in the villages (Flick, 2002; Mason, 2002). Besides labourer kammi, the sample included educated and better off kammi in order to solicit their views about the factors behind increasing detachment of kammi from their parentage occupations. The study participants were divided into various groups ranging from five to eight participants. In total, seventy eight villagers of different quoms, gender and ages participated in the study. FGDs were separately conducted with the male and the female villagers (six each). Female research assistants were recruited and trained to conduct FGDs with the women research participants. Informed consent was taken from the villagers for their participation in the study (Irvine, 1998). Each FGD was facilitated by a moderator and a note taker. All of the FGDs were conducted in Punjabi language (Creswell, 1997; Denzin and Lincoln, 1998) and the duration of each session ranged from 40-90 minutes. Privacy and anonymity of the participants and confidentiality of the data was ensured during the process of data collection and data analysis (Grinyer, 2002; Neuman, 2000). After the fieldwork, the data was transcribed, translated and coded (Have, 1999).

Major themes and sub themes were identified by referring to the initial coding. Thematic analysis technique was used to analyze the data (Bailey, 2008; Kvale, 1996).

III. Findings

The study participants identified various factors responsible for the decline of traditional labour relations between zamindar and kammi quoms that mainly include the changing patterns of caste occupations and technological advancements in agriculture. The study also explored the various reasons behind the decline of seyp system in rural Punjab that influence the life of kammi and zamindar quoms differently. In order to facilitate the analysis of data, the findings of the study are discussed under the following major themes: decline of caste based occupations, changing dynamics of seyp system, divergent views of old and young kammis, advantages and disadvantages of the decline in seyp system and technological advancements in agriculture.

The changing patterns of caste based occupations

The study found that the service providing quoms residing in Punjabi villages are increasingly leaving their parentage occupations due to several interconnected factors. The participants identified the availability of daily wage labour, migration of kammis towards cities and opportunities of independent businesses as the reasons of gradual changes in the patterns of caste based occupations. Additionally, the inclination towards education and jobs, going abroad for earning purposes and emergence of new institutions and consequent changes in consumption behaviours of the villagers were the other factors discussed by the study participants.

The findings of the study suggest that the zamindars have started referring to cities to get the services once provided by kammis in the village setting. For example, one of the participants highlighted that: *“the villagers like to buy modern steel crockery from the towns now. As a result, potters in villages do not get that much work and most of them have left their caste occupations.”* Ulfat, a barber by profession, mentioned that *“the barbers have established their saloons in nearby towns. They do not like to work on seyp or coming to zamindars’ houses for haircut. Instead, the villagers visit their barbershops for haircut and pay them in currency.”* Similarly, the villagers nowadays buy wooden material for construction, furniture and agricultural purposes from the cities. As a result, the traditional occupations of carpenters have nearly been ended. The above discussion suggests that the modernization of caste occupations through the emergence of new institutions and changing consumption patterns of the villagers has reduced the earning opportunities for kammis in the village setting.

Daily wage labour in nearby industries and local construction projects is emerging as the major reason of kammis leaving their parentage occupations. During FGDs with kammis, one of the participants mentioned that *“since there are better earning opportunities available nowadays, we do not like to work as labourers on*

seyp. We rather prefer daily wage jobs as it is more beneficial and better than seyp.” While talking about other factors, Salman, an educated young man from barbers’ biradari, highlighted that there is an increasing realization among young kammis that acquiring education and respectable jobs can help them to achieve a better life: *“young kammis are taking interest in education to have good jobs. They want to leave menial tasks and get rid of stigma associated with their parentage occupations.”*

The changing dynamics of seyp - labour relations and modes of payment

The study found that the dynamics of seyp system in Punjabi villages have changed over time. As discussed in the previous section, the caste occupations associated with different kammi quoms have almost ended with the emergence of new institutions, changing consumption patterns and technological advancements in agriculture. Kammi seypis now provide physical labour to zamindars in agricultural activity, household affairs and dera system. They do not perform their caste based occupational works in seyp relationship any more. Hence, the seyp system in contemporary Punjab is not based on occupational expertise of kammis; it predominantly revolves around the provision of labour. For instance, a potter who still works on seyp with zamindars explained that: *“I am responsible to help zamindars in farming, harvesting and cutting trees to provide them wood for burning. I also serve guests at their dera and provide them labour at marriages.”* He added that after the decline of caste occupations, kammis are working only as servants of their seypi zamindars.

The study found that the rules of payment in seyp system are also changing over time. Many kammis working on seyp with zamindars mentioned that zamindars pay them in cash per month for their services instead of grains after a year. Some of the zamindar participants, contrary to Eglar’s (1960) analysis, highlighted that the seyp is increasingly becoming an economic contract that lacks the moral and social responsibilities by the seypis. Furthermore, it was mentioned that the seyp relationship does not endure across generations nowadays.

Seyp has become an economic bondage with defined rules of work and payment. Nowadays, seypis are less concerned about their social obligations towards each other and are less keen to extend their support to other party in the time of need. Zamindars and kammis do not take seyp as compulsion and seyp contracts are easily broken nowadays.

Traditionally, the seyp contracts exist between kammi households as well. However, as a result of the decline in caste occupations, the seyp between kammis is also coming to an end. The study found that, in exceptional cases, a few poor zamindar households were engaged in seyp with better off zamindar households of their village. They were mainly responsible to assist their seypis in agricultural activities and in return were paid in seasonal crops and grains.

Divergent views of old and young kammis

Nearly all of the study participants mentioned that the seyp system is towards decline with the passage of time. However, the opinions of elder and younger kammis about the seyp, as an institution and its effectiveness, differed considerably. The majority of elder kammis working on seyp with zamindars supported the seyp system and considered it beneficial for both zamindars and kammis. Conversely, the majority of young kammis were not in the favor of seyp system and did not like to work on seyp with zamindars. While a few of the uneducated and poor young kammis were still engaged in seyp contracts with zamindars, others preferred to work on daily wages in nearby industries. Sajid, an educated young man from barbers' family highlighted that *"the young men from our families do not like to live their lives as labourers and servants of zamindars, like our forefathers."* The young kammis were of the view that the seyp system would come to an end after their parents' generation.

Furthermore, the young kammis considered that the village life runs more efficiently after the decline in seyp system. They highlighted that when seyp was in practice, kammis were not available on short notice to the villagers due to their excessive engagements at zamindars' households. After the decline in seyp system, the villagers get these services quickly. For example, in the case of barbers, the villagers do not need to wait now. They go to the barbershops and get their services in short time. In return, barbers are paid in currency on the spot, and they do not need to wait for six months or a year. Hence, both parties are beneficiaries of the decline in seyp system.

Decline in seyp system: advantages and disadvantages

An overwhelming majority of the zamindar participants considered that they have lost their caste privileges and control over kammis that they used to exercise through the seyp relationships. On the other side, kammis appeared to be the beneficiaries of the decline in seyp system that has reduced their direct socioeconomic dependence on zamindars. While discussing the pros and cons of the decline of seyp system, Fazal explained that certain tasks such as distributing customary food at ceremonial occasions and serving guests at dera are assigned to kammis. Zamindars consider it against their pride to perform such tasks. Due to the decline of seyp system, it is becoming increasingly difficult for zamindars to find kammi labour for performing such menial tasks. Fazal was of the view that the decline of seyp system would not affect kammis that much because seyp is not the mere source of their livelihood. They are labourers and may find alternate jobs at other places such as industry. He was of the opinion that the kammis are liberated from a system that used to maltreat them as slaves. Akbar, a kammi who recently left working on seyp, mentioned that *"in seyp, kammis were at zamindars' disposal. They used to get every kind of labour from Kammis for free and mistreat them as well."*

The seyp system is seen as the major institution that used to bind zamindars and kammis in labour relations and determine the dynamics of their interaction in the

village setting. After the decline in seyp system, the relationship patterns between zamindar and kammi quoms are changing, with positive effects on the life of kammis. Tahir considered that *“kammi remain kammi (servants) because of seyp. Due to the decline in seyp, direct dependence of kammi on zamindars has reduced. Kammi are leaving their caste occupations and opting for other works in order to live respectable life.”*

Conversely, a few of the kammi working on seyp with zamindars stressed that the decline in seyp system has negatively affected kammi. They mentioned that the zamindars used to facilitate their seypi kammi in the time of need e.g. at ceremonial occasions in their houses. Sharif being a seypiof zamindars explained how they supported him on the death of his father to serve the guests who came to attend the funeral. Zamindars provided him with wheat, rice, milk and meat and assisted him financially. He emphasized that *“being in seyp with zamindars, we need not to worry in the time of happiness or sorrowfulness. Zamindars supportus. If seyp comes to an end, we will lose this favor.”*

Technological advancements in agriculture and seyp system

The study found that the technological advancements in agriculture have played the major role in the decline of seyp system. Traditional caste occupations of blacksmith and carpenter to manufacture and repair agricultural tools have mostly been replaced by the latest agricultural technology. As a result, the majority of them have either left their caste occupations or started to work as mechanics at the nearby urban centres using their occupational expertise in modern ways. They do not work for zamindars on seyp. Falaksher, a zamindar man explained that *“zamindars nowadays have tractors for agricultural activities and do not use ploughs made by carpenters. Therefore, the carpenters are leaving their caste occupations and seyp jobs and looking for alternate earning opportunities.”* Another zamindar man mentioned that *“in the past, zamindars used to buy agricultural tools from carpenters and blacksmiths in villages and hire kammi labour for cultivation and harvesting. Most of these works are now done by modern machines.”*

Furthermore, kammi labour is used in agricultural activities and serves as an earning source for kammi. However, because of the technological advancements in agriculture, the involvement of human labour has been reduced in agricultural activity. Consequently, kammi are looking for alternate sources of livelihood and thus their economic activities have started stretching out of the village boundaries. These new labour opportunities have led to the decline of seyp system. Qurban, a kammi man justified the situation by saying that *“when we do not get any work in village to earn our livelihood, we are forced to go out of the village boundaries to look for other opportunities.”*

Zamindar participants highlighted that the cost of agricultural production has been increased due to the involvement of modern machinery in agriculture. Paying the seypi kammi in crops and also providing them with financial and other help in the time of need multiplies the economic burden on zamindars. Therefore,

zamindars in the villages are increasingly terminating seyp contracts with kammis. They rather prefer to hire kammi labour in the time of need and pay them in cash in return to their services.

IV. Discussion

The major contribution of this study is to examine the changing dynamics of seyp system that serves as an institution to bind zamindar and kammi quoms in labour relations. Eglar's (1960) study, the most comparable to this research, was conducted in the 1950s; the caste system in Punjabi villages has changed considerably since then (Usman, 2011).

Various studies (e.g. Chaudhary, 1999; Lyon, 2004) have mentioned that the seyp system is towards decline in many parts of the Punjab province because of the availability of industrial labour and government jobs. This study complements previous researches and explores many other factors that have played a role in the decline of caste occupations of kammi quoms and thus the seyp system. The traditional seyp system was organized around the occupational expertise of kammis who used to provide labour and their occupational services to zamindars and were paid in the form of agricultural products (Eglar, 1960). However, the present study explored that, with time, the caste occupations of kammis have declined, modified or substituted by newly emerged institutions. For example, because of the barber shops and availability of catering services, the occupational expertise of barbers related to cooking food at ceremonial occasions and doing haircuts as part of seyp contract have nearly been ended. Similarly, the agricultural tools made by carpenters and labour of kammis in agricultural activities are less required as a result of the increasing use of modern technology. The study found that due to the availability of alternative employment opportunities, kammis have started leaving their parentage occupations. They prefer to work as daily wage labour in nearby industries, migrate towards cities to work as mechanics and settle abroad for earning purposes. More and more kammis in the villages are purchasing land for cultivation. Additionally, the present study explores the increasing trends among kammis to acquire education and jobs. Having alternative sources of livelihood, members of kammi quoms are increasingly leaving their caste occupations and do not like to engage in seyp contracts with zamindars. In contrast to Eglar's study conducted in 1950s, very few kammis are now earning their livelihood through their caste occupations.

Furthermore, the findings of the present study show that the dynamics of seyp system have changed considerably over time in terms of its socio-economic obligations and expectations across seypis, as discussed by Eglar (1960). Since the caste occupations associated with kammi quoms are less relevant in the contemporary Punjabi villages, kammis work as paid labour only for their seypis. There is no involvement of their occupational crafts in seyp, like in the past. The rules of payment in seyp system have also been changed with time, with increasing involvement of currency than agricultural products. Zamindars mostly pay kammis, in return to their services, in cash nowadays, rather than in grains after a year. Furthermore, in contrast to Eglar's (1960) analysis, seyp is now more of an economic

contract between seypis. Moral and social responsibilities are not felt by either of the parties, as in the past, and nor do the seyp endure across generations nowadays.

In line with previous researches, the findings of the present study suggest that the decline of seyp system has affected kammi and zamindar quoms differently. Various studies (e.g. Chaudhary, 1999; Lyon, 2004) have highlighted that the direct economic dependence of kammis on zamindars is reducing because of the decline in traditional labour relations in the form of seyp system. Kammis, in the past, were dependent on zamindars for earning their livelihood through the seyp. Similarly, the present study explored that the kammis are less disadvantaged as a result of the decline in seyp system compared to their zamindar counterparts. But rather, an overwhelming majority of study participants considered that kammis are liberated from a system of socioeconomic dependence on zamindars, in which they were treated as slaves. They do not perform menial tasks for zamindars now and are opting for respectable occupations. On the other hand, as a result of the decline in seyp system, it is becoming increasingly difficult for zamindars to find kammi labour.

Conversely, Hooper and Hamid (2003) viewed seyp as a system in favour of kammis where zamindars had social, economic and moral obligations towards kammis of their village. It is considered that, as a result of the decline in seyp system, social position of kammis in rural Punjab has further been weakened. Similarly, quite a few study participants in the present study suggested that the decline of seyp system in rural life has negatively affected the social position of poor kammis and those who are still engaged in seyp with zamindars. They have lost the socioeconomic and political favor that their seypi zamindars used to provide them in the hour of need.

V. Conclusion

Caste based occupations of service providing quoms are becoming irrelevant in contemporary rural life of Pakistan. Consequently, the dynamics of seyp system between zamindar and kammi quoms are undergoing the process of change. Kammis only provide labour to their seypi zamindars to manage agricultural activity, dera system and household affairs. The seyp has become more of an economic relationship, where the seypis are less keen about their moral and social responsibilities towards each other, like in the past. Decline of seyp system has reduced the economic dependence of kammis on zamindars, which has uplifted their social standing in the village life. On the other side, zamindars are losing their caste privileges and control over kammis that they used to exercise through seyp system. Technological advancements in agriculture have played the major role in the decline of caste occupations and seyp system. Additionally, the technological advancements reduced the involvement of human labour in agricultural activities that was an important source of earning for kammis.

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