

## Book Review

Rizvi, Mubbashir., *The Ethics of Staying: Social Movements and Land Rights Politics in Pakistan*. 224pp., Stanford University Press 2019

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Mubbashir Rizvi's "The Ethics of Staying" is a rich ethnographic study of the Anjuman Mazareen Punjab (AMP) and its struggle against military-led conversion of the Okara Military Farms from a sharecropping tenancy arrangement to cash contract farming. The book examines two central issues, one rigorously examined in Pakistani scholarship and another that has received relatively less attention: civil-military relations and social movements respectively. This is not a book that surveys prevailing land relations or the political economy of land in Pakistan, though these issues are certainly well treated. Rather, this is a contribution that looks at the dynamics of social movements—how they are birthed, how they are negotiated, where they break down—through the lens of the AMP's agitation in Punjab. In doing so, it provides readers with textured insights into how rural Pakistanis residing in what is considered the nation's 'heartland' view both the military as well as themselves.

The book contains three main arguments that are built around finely detailed ethnographic insights. First, that the political agency of farmers is shaped by the spatial politics of the region, overdetermined in significant ways by British canal colonisation. While there is a great deal of work on Punjab's canal colonies (Imran Ali's *The Punjab Under Imperialism* and David Gilmartin's *Blood and Water* come to mind), the link between physical infrastructure and community claim-making is the focus here. Second, that the AMP articulated demands based on material livelihood rather than a claim of indigeneity, as is often seen in other land-related social movements. Third, that the AMP's diverse coalition and relatively loose hierarchical structure was impacted and transformed significantly through its collaboration with NGOs and urban activist groups. All three of these points are argued in tandem with a historical charting of the movement's origins, its successes and its repression by military and paramilitary forces.

The rich detail that forms the substance of *The Ethics of Staying* comes from fieldwork spanning almost a decade between 2004 and 2014, with the bulk of it happening in 2007-8 when the AMP and military had reached an uneasy

compromise to allow the farmers to occupy the contested land. This span of time is important because it provides readers insight into the biography of the movement—from 2004 when the movement was militant, to 2007 when a less charged socio-political atmosphere allowed for reflection and fracturing, to 2014 when the military was using anti-terror legislation to arrest and torture farmers. Rizvi's account of the various ways he had to negotiate access to his field and interviewees—initially discreet, eventually more open and embedded—is both illustrative of the contingencies and ethical implications of research methodologies as well as compelling ethnographic material in and of itself.

Methodologically, *The Ethics of Staying* succeeds in painting a vivid picture of agitation, cooperation and discord in rural Pakistan because of the wide array of people interviewed, ranging from Muslim and Christian AMP leaders, rank and file farmers and militant village women to high-ranking officials from the military, police and civilian institutions. Many dynamics of the movement are brought to life through the voices of Rizvi's interlocutors—the tension between young optimism and a weathered sobriety illustrated by AMP Spokesman Latif and former leader Farid Daula, mutual mistrust and rupture along religious lines represented by the rivalry between former chairman of the AMP Younus Iqbal, a Christian, and the revered Muslim leader Mehr Abdul Sattar, gendered marginalisation and disaffection in the trajectory of the movement expressed by the AMP's female leaders, and so on. This thick description humanises the AMP's towering figures, fracturing the monolith of 'movement' into its constituent, cooperative and conflicting parts.

Chapter 1 builds on this methodological groundwork, introducing readers to the various personalities aforementioned while simultaneously offering helpful background material for non-specialists—the role of the military in Pakistani politics, the centrality of Punjab to the project of nation-building, and the growing influence of neoliberal governance techniques on land and tenancy administration. This last point is especially important, given that the core issue behind the AMP's rise in Okara is the

marketisation of land relations, threatening the tenants' subsistence, livelihoods and shelter. In a later chapter, Rizvi tells us that many of his interlocutors were more fearful of multinational corporations such as Nestlé than they were of the army. This is interesting and invites greater consideration. However, such wider political economy concerns are introduced as quickly as they are moved on from and while the reader appreciates that the rich insights of this book lie in the ethnographic detailing of a social movement, one is also left wondering how the story of the Okara Military Farms and the story of neoliberalisation in the global south might speak to one another. Nonetheless, the chapter is successful in setting the stage for one of the book's primary tasks, which is to forge a historical connection between infrastructural development and the formation of political subjectivities in rural Punjab.

This work is done in Chapter 2, which contains a rewarding history of the Okara military farms, tracing the evolution of the land from nomadic use to Christian missionary hub to public land and eventually as the site of British canal colonies. There is substantive discussion around how colonial governing forces saw their infrastructural investments not only as profit-making ventures but as tools through which to manipulate Punjab's cultural landscape and free it from its cleavages of *baradari*, creed and religion. This is done within the theoretical framing of the "reciprocal gift economy" to make the argument that colonial investment and preferential land allotment in central Punjab eventually shaped expectations of citizenship, rights, and justice in its modern-day inhabitants. While the argument is thought-provoking, the concept of 'reciprocity' upon which it sits remains slightly nebulous, with Rizvi himself writing that partition resulted in a population exchange that saw many Hindus and Sikhs leave Pakistani Punjab for India. One is left with some questions about the continuity of reciprocity across time and space and whether this theoretical framing does justice to the argument that Okara's infrastructural history played a significant role in the rise of the AMP years later. Framing aside, this chapter argues persuasively that the memory of Okara Military Farm's origins as a site of transformative state investment does play a decisive role in shaping the political subjectivities of the farmers as well as their demands.

These subjectivities and demands form the focus of Chapter 3, where there are illuminating discussions about rights, moral claims, and juridical identities. The argument is that history plays a role in the construction and articulation of rights or claims to the land, and the evidence offered is very compelling. Rizvi discusses certain villages that were razed to the ground to make way for the construction of the Okara cantonment in 1972 that, decades later, played less active roles in the AMP movement for fear of retribution. He also details a more visceral lack of trust in the military in Christian villages because of a shared understanding that the land originally (and rightfully) belonged to the Church. Both cases demonstrate a robust link between history, memory, political agency and claim-making. Where the chapter is less

persuasive is in the consigning of tenant demands to the domain of the 'moral' instead of the legal. The dichotomy between 'legal' and 'moral' has been problematised by scholars like Sally Falk Moore (1973) who argue that law is a semi-autonomous field, at once shaping and shaped by external forces such as norms, cultural practices, personal networks, and politics. Is a moral claim one that is unconcerned with legal precedent or justiciability? Is it one that dismisses formal venues of dispute resolution for popular politics? Or is it something else entirely? One is left asking what the author means by 'moral claims' and how such claims fit into the wider ethic of staying.

While the first half of *The Ethics of Staying* offers rich historical background and creative theoretical propositions to explain the rise of the AMP, it is the second half of the book, Chapters 4, 5 and the Coda, where the sheer depth of Rizvi's meticulous ethnographic work truly shines. A productive engagement with subaltern social movement literature frames Rizvi's thick description, as we are offered insight into the long-standing impetuses giving rise to a movement that has achieved considerable success in its occupation of the military farms. Commodification of rural life is the backdrop against which the reader learns of the everydayness of social movements—where the farmers meet, what they discuss when they sit together, why they see cash contract farming as a threat to their lives and so on. However, it is here that we are also introduced to the many cleavages that threaten the continued vitality of the AMP's opposition, including religion, gender, and land ownership. The fragility of the movement as one that is not self-contained but instead open to external dynamics such as national elections, NGO funding and alliances with civil society groups comes sharply into focus. How these dynamics create intra-movement rivalries and shape organisational structure is highly instructive for other scholars studying postcolonial social movements. The military's renewed commitment to crush the movement with the use of anti-terror legislation and to coerce farmers into accepting a cash contract system through intimidation, force and violence is illustrative of the ebbs and flows of politics from below. All of this is reflected on in the final pages of the book, where the concepts of memory and claim-making, legality and violence, unity and division are thoughtfully considered in terms of lessons to be learned for theoretician and practitioner alike.

A central question in *The Ethics of Staying* is how a farmers movement against military-led commodification of land could start so soon after a military coup and count as many successes as it did. To answer this, Rizvi offers a number of persuasive propositions, ranging from infrastructural legacy and a unique political subjectivity formation to the role played by transnational and urban actors in amplifying the movement's demands, actors and legitimacy. However, as someone who works on land commodification and dispossession, I could not help but ask the opposite question: why do we see such little opposition to the takeover of land for speculative investment in Pakistan? Writing on the Indian context, scholars like

Michael Levien (2018) note sharp rises in farmer protests against dispossession of their lands. In Pakistan, the rapid conversion of arable and peri-urban land for real estate and other speculative purposes is not being met with the same force of opposition. When discussing the failures of the AMP movement, Rizvi quotes the young and hopeful AMP spokesperson Latif: “our biggest fault is that this movement should have started a long time ago”.

While this book does not set out to answer the aforementioned question, its detailed illustrations of the military’s deployment of violence, coercion and deception to execute land acquisitions, conversions and purchases highlight the uneven playing field upon which land contestation occurs in Pakistan. Civilian development authorities, for instance, are watching and learning from the military, increasingly turning to the “DHA model” for their own profit-making housing schemes. In *The Ethics of Staying*, Mubbashir Rizvi provides an immense depth of ethnographic detail surrounding a farmers’ movement that captured the national imagination during a time of military rule. In its endeavour to examine the many internal and external dynamics that shaped the biography of a social movement, it also speaks to the future of any politics against commodification and dispossession. As such, it forms an extremely important contribution to scholarship on civil-military relations, social movements, and land in contemporary Pakistan.

### References

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