

**Class Conflict and Change
Profile of a Punjabi Village**

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Class Conflict and Change Profile of a Punjabi Village

Ahmad Salim

While speeding on the first-ever motorway from Islamabad to Lahore, you may pull over for a while at Miana Gondal just a couple of miles away from Salam Interchange. It is a small village, doing its best to catch up with the mechanized world. Earlier on, it was a part of Tehsil Phalia in District Gujrat. But now it is mapped out in tehsil Malakwal of District Mandi Bahauddin in accordance with the new geographical division.

New Scenario/Perspective

Miana Gondal is an age-old village of the interior Punjab. However, it can no longer be termed as Marx's purely classical village because it has lost its self-sufficiency and has gotten close enough to the city by exploiting the latest marvels of science. Though the story of its urbanization stretches over two decades only, it has shaken its stillness and calmness, which had always been a typical feature of the classical village. In the early part of the nineteenth century, a dispensary, a post office and a primary school for boys were established. After the inception of Pakistan, the boys' school was upgraded to the middle level and a primary school for girls was built. By now, the girls and boys both pass their matriculation there. Recently, an intermediate college for boys has also been approved for Miana Gondal, but it has not been established yet. Perhaps because the influential residents of the nearby village Bosal have tactfully gotten the same college approved for their village. However, all these facilities are specific for the children of landlords, worthy shop-owners and the well-off Khwaja families. The educational opportunities for the lower strata, especially the Muslim sheikhs known as Musallis, is very poor.

Geographically, Miana Gondal is situated in the suburbs of Mandi Bahauddin and is adjacent on one side to Phularwan and Bhalwal, which are towns of Sargodha District. The other side is linked with Tehsil Pind Dadan Khan of District Jhelum. The village is a 73-mile drive from Gujrat, 40 miles from Sargodha, and 143 miles from Lahore, the capital of Punjab. Despite its distance from the major cities, the village has developed a civic air. After the completion of the motorway, it is about a two-and-a-half hour drive to get to either Lahore or Islamabad. All the modern technology and equipment considered to be the hallmark of a city is visible in Miana Gondal. You will find transistor radios, tape recorders television sets, dish antennas, telephones and all the most sophisticated agricultural tools and equipment. However, these things have only given the residents a tinge of materialism, shallow social status and frustration.

Things have changed now. Television programs have replaced the tradition of puppet shows in the landlord's house. People are the same but professions also have changed. The new generation of weavers is preparing sweets or selling vegetables. This was my village.

The boys and girls with whom I spent my childhood by playing various sports around the village now laugh at my "conservative" approach and feelings. I might be too romantic about the past, but I really felt quite sad to see all the good traditions of my village being dashed to the ground. Now, there is only a blind race for money. Money, mosquitoes and houseflies are equally increasing just as the filthy ponds and heaps of garbage is mounting day-by-day.

Not too long ago, it was only a limited upper class of the landlords or Khwaja family who exploited the villager. But now another class of rising shopkeepers has also joined hands with the exploiters to take everything from the lower class. During the last couple of years, many new and modern houses have been constructed. These houses are especially comfortable because they have flush toilets and a supply of water. However, despite all that, nobody has ever thought of changing the negative and ailing attitudes toward the lower classes.

No doubt, the new inventions have upgraded the system and standard of life in Miana Gondal but only to the consternation of the lower class. Their fate is still the same but they are changing their professions in an effort to join the ongoing material race. The traditional baker Oldma Phattein's (Fatima's) common mud oven is no longer in working condition and the people do not gather there to get their breads baked. Gone with the tradition is the dialogue about the socio-domestic development of the village among the villagers. But Oldma's third generation is sweating and burning their blood more than ever before. Likewise, Uncle Yousaf, Oldma's older son, is exerting even more than usual just to keep his body and soul together. On the other hand, his younger brother, Nazir, who had always been proud of his dandy horse and Tonga, now looks for new openings, such as selling ice.

In a corner of the village lives a group of the degraded outcast called *Musallis* (Muslim sweepers) in disparaging conditions. These *Musallis* once used to clean and carry the household garbage from the houses of the Khwajas and other families for a petty wage of 10 rupees a month. After 1980, their plight has turned from bad to worse. Brick-kiln owners exploit the *Musallis*. Nobody is there to feel sympathy for them and do something humane for them. Instead, they are verbally insulted and degraded.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, half a century before my birth, the Khwajas introduced materialism to this village.

Khawaja Family, The Earliest Shopkeepers

The first house my grandfather Mian Fazal Karim bought in Miana Gondal is situated in front of the small graveyard and market of the village. At one side of the house live the *miyanas* (religious/spiritual leaders) and on the back reside the blacksmiths whose oldest member, Uncle Ghulam, is a living history of the village. Another senior member, Muhammad Yousaf of the same clan, recently died of cancer; he was not provided adequate treatment at the Shaukat Khanum Hospital. However, Muhammad Yasin, Shafiq, and their children of the third generation still talk about their past links with our family in an earnest way but the same is not warmly reciprocated by the members of our family. Now, nearly all of my grandfather's family has shifted from the village to Lahore, Islamabad and Mandi Bahauddin and they have broken their ties with the village. During my childhood, it was puzzling how the men in our family could go to the blacksmiths' houses and talk to their women, but their male members were neither allowed to enter into our houses nor talk to our women. They came to our house only when there were no women in sight. Due to their lower class position, this is no longer a puzzle for me now.

It was from the same Uncle Ghulam that I learned a quarter of a century ago that my grandfather migrated from Pind Dadan Khan in District Jhelum to this village. In those days, Muslims were setting up small-scale shops in competition with the Hindu shopkeepers. So, my grandfather was also among the pioneers of Muslim trade. Uncle Ghulam is the appropriate narrator for this transitional period because it is directly concerned with the trade sources and tactics, which replaced the barter system, by money exchange. This

also caused the trade of *Musallis*, initially in our houses, but later on by big landlords and contractors of brick-kilns.

Uncle Ghulam reminisced:

Your grandfather, you know, Mian Fazal Karim, came to Miana Gondal and said, 'I have to set up a shop here.' The linen and muslin was not in vogue here then. There used to be cloth, weaved in looms. There was no system of yards or meters. Instead cloth was measured by hands; four to six hands of cloth were enough for a skirt.

The same cloth was usually colored black for turbans. Mian Fazal Karim opened a shop here and introduced linen and muslin. He opened his shop first in the place where the goldsmith Sattar sits. The small-side measurement of this cloth was never accurate enough and nobody knew how much of it would be sufficient for a shirt and a turban. Hayyat Dhabba's (tailor) father, viz., Muhammad, used to stitch clothes at that time. People normally went to consult him regarding the exact length of cloth required for their purpose. However, it was a constant source of confusion for them. Your grandfather, one day, went to Miani (District Sargodha) and fetched a tailor, Imam Din, for his shop. This lowered the importance of Muhammad.

Uncle Ghulam also shared a long story of the differences between the local and outside tailors. The local tailors stitched clothes in exchange for goods whereas the immigrant tailor charged money for introducing modern fashions in stitching. So my grandfather's cloth shop hit the looms hard and his modern tailor successfully introduced the money-trade for novel designs. Likewise, it uprooted the old forms of production. The modern culture introduced by my grandfather flourished rapidly. But just as the old colonialism was pushed back by American imperialism, this new trend and development also slipped away from the clutches of our second generation.

First, the agricultural land saw its doom and then the in-house division turned the houses and shops into insignificantly small units. This socio-economic dislocation occurred during my childhood. I still remember the men and women coming to our home for washing clothes, sweeping, carrying garbage away, cutting woods and fetching water for the house. Their payment was our few old and used clothes. They were hired to do one task but were exploited and ended up doing other petty chores. Their trivial and nominal wages were fixed but the sphere or nature of the job was unlimited. For example, Bahishtan Musallan was paid just five rupees a month and eventually got a five-rupee raise per house for sweeping and taking out the garbage for our family and other Khwaja families.

First Era of the Musallis Slavery

The seeds of the exploitative system sown by my grandfather had by then started blossoming. Currency was in common use. First, the silver coins and later on paper rupees started showing their magic. This had great charm for the Musallis. I remember that I used to refer to Bahishtan, the Musalli woman who swept our home, as a "Phuphi" (paternal aunt). We belonged to the upper-middle class and had emigrated from a bigger town. We had manners and courtesies. We knew that we could get them to carry our garbage at the cost of just two rupees if the ironical weapon of respect is also used. We felt they were low but we gave them patronizing care. This is how all the civilized people treat their pet dogs.

Those days, there were only 10 or 12 families of the Khwajas in Miana Gondal. So the net wages of Bahishtan were never more than 40 or 50 rupees. At times, they received more if guests in the house were generous to them. Whenever my paternal aunts visited us, they gave a family of servants some money to show appreciation for their services and faithfulness as well as a mark of patronage in our honor.

I was different than the rest of my family. After passing my primary-standard examination, I left my native place and went a couple of hundred kilometers away for further education, the first rebellion of its kind in the family. Distant from home, I stayed with a close relative and experienced the hardships of a practical life. I realized the atrocities of imperialistic capitalism on the lower ranks of my village as well as elsewhere. I could empathize with the Musallis. I thought about the chronic cruelties enforced on these servants. I remembered the many times my friends and cousins used the female servants on the roofs, porches basements and even lavatories to satisfy their sexual urge. It was a well-established belief of the town's "gentlemen" that these "cheap" servants are meant to please and serve in every possible way.

I recall getting in a fight with my older brothers about this issue when I visited my village once in 1985. I cried out "A Musalli also has self-respect. He is a human being too. Like us, they are also created by God." But I was a fool to them. Once, I even told my brother "not to talk nonsense" while giving a lecture about Musallis. This was considered an act of blasphemy on my part. Ironically, a Musalli youth criticized me for talking rudely to my elder brother. Slavery had virtually permeated to the slaves and their captors.

Our elders did not disapprove of the youngster's sexual misconduct but winked at them as well. The only solution to such moral lapses, they believed, was to get to their young ones married. But a chain of marriages failed to stop the practice. Even after marriage, these youngsters continued practicing their "special rights." It was fascinating for them to be members of the nobility and take advantage of the less privileged. The worst part was that the wrongdoer was never accused of this immoral act; the victim was blamed.

Life Account of Bahishtan

I met with Bahishtan in 1982 and she shared her story. The earliest recollections of Bahishtan were that her ancestors immigrated from Thakur Waryam to Mian Gondal. Here, they saved money by being thrifty, purchased a plot and erected a small mud house where she lived until her death. She was about 80 when she died. Her death in late 1980's marked the end of this house as her family moved to differed parts. Her youngest son, Mutalli, is now living in a single-room house. Bahishtan's fourth generation has also grown up. Her house, like the other Musallis' homes, was situated in the farthest end of the village to mark caste differences. She could not remember the exact price of the plot, but mentioned that it cost her 200 rupees to erect two separate houses -- single-room and one of them was made of kiln and bricks.

Bahishtan devoted all her life to the service of Khwajas. However, in the changing scenario, the Khwajas either built new houses or left the village. Bahishtan became jobless. Her sons then began looking for work. The eldest son, Sardara, started working at a brick-kiln, marking the beginning of a new kind of slavery in which a man puts himself on sale along with his wife and children. Her second son, Karam Ali, also joined a kiln. The contractors were putting the laborers through unspeakable tasks. Bahishtan said:

First, they lend some money, which is repaid in the form of monthly deduction from the salary. As a result, we sell ourselves for years to come. The irony of the situation is that the women and children also become their possession. As long as the loan is not paid back, we are their slaves round the clock. It is the same with all the kilns. Just look at the cruelty! They pay only 20 to 22 rupees at the most for a thousand bricks. Half of the amount is deducted out of the total wages as an installment of the loan and the other half we get for our needs. If this was all, we could have accepted this with some satisfaction. But they cheat us in accounts. If they deal fairly, the whole amount of the loan could be repaid within a few months but contractors keep on increasing the advance amount in a technical way such that we became their permanent slaves. This business is at its zenith in Haripur, Azad Kashmir, Jhelum, and Rawalpindi. The contractors are extorting money. This is why every contractor has three to four kilns. They pay us 1,000 rupees but note it as 2,000 rupees. So we fail to purchase our freedom even after the season is over. We are in debt to them more than before even after paying them back more than the due amount in the form of deductions from our wages. As a result, we are bound to stay their slaves even after the season is over and there is no labor for us. We cannot go anywhere to work and earn our bread. Prisoners are never choosers. We remain their prisoners along with our children, sisters and brothers. At times, men go to the other kilns for labor but their women and children stay back as prisoners of the previous kiln. This is the most terrible state of affairs.

Now, for example, Sardara has gone for work at another kiln, leaving his wife and children behind. He will have some amount in advance from the contractor of that kiln in order to liberate his wife and kids from the first one and become a slave of his second master. This is such a heinous cycle of slavery that we cannot liberate ourselves from.

The Musalli women of Miana Gondal have now nearly given up household drudgery. They accompany their men to the kilns, as this is one of the conditions of the contractors of the brick-kilns. They insist on the company of women, obviously to prepare food for their men. The women cook and work along with men in making dies for bricks and other jobs. Bahishtan mentioned that conditions for women are tough. "Since my son, Mutalli, is a bachelor, where could he get a wife from to work with him at the kiln? So, his sister has to accompany him now." The contractors exploit the honor of a Musalli woman and sexually abused them. Girls cry helplessly. There is no bigger curse and helplessness than being a defaulter of the contractor of some kiln.

Nearly blind, Bahishtan narrated:

The plight of our family is very desperate. Sardara is licking the feet of another contractor to get his wife and children freed from the old one. This is starvation for us. We have really become helpless and degraded. There is not even a single penny for us. We have already borrowed a great deal of flour, pulses and vegetables. Although we deserve about 10,000 rupees as our wages for three seasons, the contractors instead have put a claim of around 18,000 to 25,000 rupees on us. We have even tried to bribe the contractor and his scribe by presenting gifts to their families but all in vain. So, we don't see mercy from any side but the skies.

Karmalli and his sister, Sardaran, took action. They sued the contractor in court but they got the run-around from one court to another between Sargodha and Lahore for the entire decade of 1980s.

Bahishtan continued:

We don't sell ourselves to the contractors alone. Rather, there is another class, which yearns for and loves to suck our blood and that is the class of landlords. What actually happens is that a Musalli borrows some money from the landlord and starts doing all the petty jobs for him. This landlord is no different from the contractor in his approach. He neither pays the affixed amount of a hundred rupees a month nor frees his Musalli slaves. Instead, he is keen on making monthly deductions continuously. It is again the Musalli who suffers most from the mutual rivalries of the landlords. Like the contractors, the landlords also don't spare the honor of the Musalli women. It is very hard for a Musalli woman to keep her chastity. Currently, there are about a hundred houses where Musallis live in Miana Gondal but their area looks deserted. This is because they are either living with the landlords or the contractors.

Slavery to Slavery

The story of Bahishtan's sufferings does not end here. The landlord also uses them in his various crimes and rivalries as bait. He fires his guns by placing it on their shoulders. Most of the acts of murder and theft are not done by the Musallis at their free will. They simply cannot disobey any order of their master. The landlords commit the crime and the report is entered against the Musallis. At times, they die so for the landlords' protection.

Borrowing and Extravagant Spending

It was the unanimous voice of my village that the Musallis were born borrowers and spendthrift. Everybody told me one or the other tale to prove that they were spendthrift and, therefore, never going to recover from their debts. The villagers believe the Musallis have been living as slaves generation after generation due to their extravagant spending.

The Musallis' Version

It was in March 1998 when I went to Miana Gondal again and a couple of new streets and houses had been erected near the Musallis' locality. The habitat of Musallis, the centuries-old pond adjacent to it, and the surrounding fields had disappeared. That habitat had become a story of the past in view of the new houses. While wandering through those streets, I found remnants of a few Musallis' houses. The house of Bahishtan had vanished altogether. However, in a single-room, shabby home, I met her youngest son, Mutalli, who told me that the kiln-owners themselves had left Karmalli and his family at Gujrat after some time.

Now Karmalli is looking after the cattle of the landlord, Shana. Normally, 200 to 400 rupees a month is the salary for this type of job. As Shana has only two or three animals, so Karmalli is being paid

300 rupees a month. The other brother, Sardara, works at a brick-kiln in Bhalwal along with his family. Before that, he served in a hospital. His sons work in Karachi.

The Miana Gondal Musalli settlement is deserted because, Mutalli said, most of the people have gone to the kilns for labor, so their houses are locked up. They will return on June 30 every year. There was also an elder Musalli, known by the name of Mirza, whose one son, Bashir, works at a veterinary hospital in the nearby town of Bar Musa. The second son looks after the cattle of the *maliks* whereas the third son works at a brick-kiln in Mirpur. Their work schedule at the kilns is disciplined and regular. They go to work at the kilns in the beginning of February and return to their homes by June 30. After a period of one month or six weeks, they get back to work when the rainy season is over.

If the rainy season stretches a little longer than usual, they are deprived of their wages for that period. So they need to borrow more money in case there is an extended rainy season. At times, the owners continue their work, which saves the Musallis from the seasonal loss.

A worker at the kiln, known as a molder, has a strange system of paying back the loan. If he were in debt for 10,000 rupees, half of his monthly wages would be deducted as a premium of his payback. Naturally, it is very hard for him to make both ends meet with the rest of the salary. He, therefore, borrows more money. At times, the owners and their scribes increase the borrowed amount in the register. The scribe usually cheats the molders when counting bricks. They count and write 400 to 450 instead of the actual 500 bricks, depriving the molder of his rightful earnings. However, the advantage of working at a kiln is that wages are based on quantity of bricks, so if the worker takes a day off, he can make up for it by working harder on another day. But if you work for a landlord, especially at his husbandry, the worker is busy all the time. Laborers are expected to feed the animals even as late as midnight and get up with the break of dawn.

Mutalli mentioned that his job at the hospital was precarious as he was appointed in the time of Benazir and now present government aims at dismissing all such appointees.

Bahishtan's son Mutalli and his brothers do not respect their sister Sardaran because they feel she has dishonored the family. When I reminded them that she had worked and suffered for her brothers, Mutalli said:

There was no need for all that on her part. We would have certainly repaid her one day. Now she has been licking dust somewhere in Lahore. Neither we know anything about her, nor are interested to know. Her daughter must also have grown up by now. Karmalli has three sons and a daughter who are all married. Sardara has four sons. From our mother's side, we also have two stepbrothers, viz. Sohbat and Salabti who reside near the mosque of the Musallis.

The Musallis have their own separate mosque. It was made of mud, proof that it belonged to the poor. Now they have spent a lot to beautify and furnish it. One of the Khwaja family members claims that the landlords have renovated the mosque but the Musallis refute this claim. Karmalli confirmed it: "This is our mosque and we have spent on it." The interesting thing about it is that its religious head is a barber who leads the prayers and teaches the children. Boys and girls can get up to a third class education here.

According to Mutalli, education for both boys and girls has been upgraded up to matric in Miana Gondal. The girls' school is located in the street of the Samors (a local caste) and the main school for boys is situated near the village police station.

Class Conflict and Change

The essence of Mutalli's conversation was that Musallis have lost their identity of caste and profession. From the house of Khwajas began their fall. Then they fell prey to the cruelties and inhuman treatment of the landlords and owners of brick-kilns. Their habitat has been deserted. What is symbolic of their life is that the stove in their homes is lit for only two months out of the year. Their children have no permanent place to live. They are deprived of education, health and even self-respect.

But the houses of Khwajas have disappeared from Miana Gondal. My family, descendants of Mian Fazil Karim, is slowly leaving the village. Two of his noble sons, who were my uncles, have passed away. His third son, Khwaja Muhammad Sharif, was my father and he died in November 1999. My father and brothers lived in Lahore. My other relatives live in to Mandi Bahauddin, Bhera and Dubai. The family home built by my grandfather is rapidly turning into ruins.

Ghulam, 100 years old, is the only survivor to describe the class and its conflict. When I met him in April 1998, he started his story with the same old sentence: "Your grandfather, you see, when he came to Miana Gondal..."

The real story I have depicted through these pages requests a detailed study and analysis. The landlords and owners of the kilns are reaping the benefit of the money-crop sown by my grandfather. The new generation of the Khwajas, mostly settled in towns, continues to exploit the common man and their race for wealth with the other rich and corrupt families. The seriousness of the situation calls for immediate attention from the government as well as the non-governmental organizations.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are worth noting:

- The affairs of landlords and kiln-owners must be thoroughly probed into.
- The Musallis must immediately be liberated from the slavery of the Dark Age.
- They should have the protection of the labor laws. For example, eight hours of work a day and enough wages to lead an ordinary life without selling their wives, sisters, daughters and sons.
- Sexual exploitation of their women must be eliminated with implementation of criminal law.
- Since the Musallis have been living as slaves for so many years, they have paid their debts with hard labor so they should be absolved of the current debts. Bonded Labor is illegal and must be eliminated.
- Beside the government, it is an obligation of the workers trade unions, journalists and social welfare organizations to reveal the facts in this matter and to help the Musallis obtain respectable work that will pay for their daily needs.
- Civil society should focus on this crisis. An investigation of how bonded labor started and its current status is necessary.

Interviews / Oral traditions

- 1 Ghulam Lohar, Miana Gondal.
- 2 (Late) Bahishtan Musallan.
- 3 Sardaran Musallan.
- 4 Sardar Musalli.
- 5 Karmalli Musalli.
- 6 Mutalli Musalli.
- 7 (Late) Khawaja Muhammad Sharif, Lahore.
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