

My Analysis of the Land Pooling Controversy in Punjab

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For the past few weeks, there has been a lot of discussions about Land pooling in Punjab on various news and social media platforms. I started doing some research on my own on this important subject. I am sharing what I found out with all those who might be interested.

Punjab's land pooling policy has ignited heated debate, touching on farmers' rights, urban planning, and the state's ecological future. Below is a deep dive into the mechanics, promises, risks, and broader implications of this ambitious model.

What Is Land Pooling?

Land pooling is a voluntary mechanism for converting agricultural land into planned urban zones:

- **Voluntary Contribution:** Multiple landowners consent to transfer their contiguous plots into a pooled land bank administered by a development authority.
- **Infrastructure Development:** The authority designs and builds roads, drainage, parks, schools, utilities, and commercial hubs across the pooled area.
- **Return of Developed Plots:** After core infrastructure is in place, each participating owner receives a fraction of the developed land in residential and/or commercial parcels.
- **Value Appreciation:** Because urban land commands far higher market rates than farmland, the returned plots—if sold or leased—can yield significantly greater returns than an upfront cash compensation.

This contrasts with the traditional **land acquisition** model under which government agencies compulsorily purchase farmland at pre-determined rates, often triggering disputes over fairness, transparency, and sufficiency of payment.

Perceived Pros

1. Farmer as Stakeholder
 - Transforms farmers from one-time sellers into long-term partners in the project's upside.
 - Potential for multiple revenue streams: sale of developed plots, rental income, or even holding as legacy assets.
2. Planned, Holistic Urban Growth
 - Enables grid-based layouts, green belts, community centers, and essential services in a single master plan.
 - Prevents the haphazard sprawl that plagues ad-hoc urban fringes.
3. Reduced Fiscal Burden on Government
 - Cuts immediate cash outflows for land purchase.
 - Development costs can be recouped by marketing a share of the developed land to private buyers or developers.

4. Flexibility and Fairness (in Theory)

- Participation is supposed to be voluntary; small-holder concessions (higher plot entitlement, annual stipends) can be negotiated.
- Scope for tailoring agreements—phased handovers, interim support, tiered plot sizes—to match farmer needs.

Perceived Cons and Farmer Concerns

1. Loss of Livelihood and Identity

- For many Punjab farmers, land is more than an asset—it's ancestral heritage and the principal source of daily income.
- Transitioning to a “paper plot” with uncertain cash flows can destabilize rural livelihoods.

2. Trust Deficit and Transparency Gaps

- Past land-acquisition projects in India suffered from opaque valuations, delayed timelines, and stalled developments, leaving owners land-locked without clarity on returns.
- Skepticism about the actual size, location, and marketability of “returned” plots.

3. Legal and Procedural Erosion

- Critics argue the model skirts key provisions of the Right to Fair Compensation and Transparency in Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act (LARR Act) 2013—namely social impact assessments, environmental clearances, and rehabilitation guarantees.
- Lack of standardized grievance redressal bodies or independent oversight committees exacerbates fears of local power imbalances and corruption.

4. Disadvantage to Smallholders and Laborers

- Large landowners with diversified portfolios can absorb long waiting periods; small and marginal farmers often lack the capital buffer to forego crop revenues for years.
- Landless agricultural laborers, sharecroppers, and tenant farmers are typically excluded from the pooling contracts, yet they bear the brunt of land-use shifts.

Long-Term Benefits for Farmers?

- **In a Best-Case Scenario:** A farmer's returned plot—situated on a well-connected road or near a commercial zone—could appreciate exponentially, translating into significant wealth creation.
- **The Gamble:** This future value hinges on actual project completion, market demand, regulatory stability, and macro-economic factors. Delays, under-utilization of infrastructure, or shifts in real estate cycles can erode the expected gains.
- **Mitigating the Risk:**
 - Guaranteed minimum buy-back clauses
 - Interim annuity payments
 - Collective landowner cooperatives to strengthen negotiation power

Do We Actually Need So Much Urban Development in Punjab?

1. Agricultural Heartland at Risk

- Punjab feeds a major share of India’s grain requirement. Converting high-yield farmland imperils food security.
- The state already grapples with depleting groundwater tables, soil salinity, and pollution from agro-chemicals—challenges that urban expansion could worsen.

2. Quality Over Quantity

- Instead of greenfield mega-townships, strengthening existing district towns with targeted upgrades—waste management, water recycling, localized manufacturing—could deliver sustainable growth.
- Promoting agro-industrial clusters, rural startups, and small-scale tourism leverages Punjab’s human and cultural capital without wholesale land conversion.

3. Guarding Against Speculation

- The scale of proposed pooling (60,000+ acres) suggests speculative real estate interests may be driving policy more than genuine housing or infrastructure needs.
- Robust data-driven demand analyses, periodic policy reviews, and caps on developer land holdings can curb speculative bubbles.

Protest Hotspots in Punjab

Farmers have mobilized across Punjab in response to the land pooling policy, with tractor rallies, sit-ins, and symbolic resistance gaining momentum. Here’s a breakdown of where and how:

Key Locations of Demonstrations

District	Protest Sites & Activities
Ludhiana	- GLADA office on Ferozepur Road: 24/7 dharna by farmers from Dakha, Jagraon, Gill, Raikot- Tractor rallies in Samrala, Jodhan, Koom Kalan, and surrounding villages
Amritsar	- Rajasansi area: tractor marches and village-level mobilization
Jalandhar	- Kukkar Pind to DC office: tractor rally route
Hoshiarpur	- Pur Hiran and Shergarh: protest boards at village entrances, police confrontations
Bathinda & Mansa	- Highway rallies and posters barring entry of officials
Mohali, Patiala, Sangrur, Ferozepur, Moga	- Widespread tractor rallies and village-level protests

Methods of Protest

Farmers are using a mix of traditional and creative resistance:

- **Tractor Rallies:** Symbolic of agrarian pride and defiance, these convoys span highways and village roads
- **Permanent Sit-ins (Dharna):** Especially outside GLADA in Ludhiana, with rotating village participation
- **Protest Boards:** Villages erect signs saying “No AAP leader allowed” until the policy is repealed
- **Effigy Burnings:** Targeting CM Bhagwant Mann and AAP leaders as a form of political dissent
- **Mahapanchayats & Motorcycle Marches:** Planned for August 11, 24, and 28 to escalate pressure
- **Resignations:** Local AAP leaders, including block presidents, have quit in protest and joined dharnas
- **Gram Sabha Resolutions:** Villages are formally rejecting the policy through local governance channels
- **Social Media & WhatsApp Campaigns:** Amplifying slogans like “Zameen Bachao, Punjab Bachao” and sharing protest visuals

The movement is decentralized but gaining traction. Farmers are drawing parallels to the 2020–21 farm law protests, and many say this is just the beginning. If the government doesn’t respond meaningfully, expect the resistance to intensify, both in terms of numbers and severity.

My Take

Punjab’s land pooling policy is, on paper, a progressive attempt to move from coercion to collaboration. By aligning farmer incentives with urban expansion, it promises to democratize development profits. But trust remains vital. Without enforceable legal safeguards, transparent timelines, independent monitoring, and genuine engagement—especially with the most vulnerable—the model risks becoming another chapter in the history of broken promises. If farmers feel squeezed, excluded, or neglected, resistance will only grow louder.

Moving Forward

- Establish **independent land-pooling tribunals** for fast, fair dispute resolution.
- Mandate **social and environmental audits** at every project milestone.
- Design **inclusive contracts** that extend benefits to landless workers and small tenants.
- Pilot smaller land-pooling projects in semi-urban edges before scaling to mega-projects.

By balancing ambition with accountability, Punjab can chart an urbanization path that honors its agrarian heritage while embracing future growth, without sacrificing the farmers who made the land what it is today.

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