

Feudalism and Pakistan: Impact on Primary Education

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Abstract

This paper undertakes a comparative analysis of historical and contemporary feudal systems, contrasting the classic models of European and Japanese Feudalism (characterized by contractual fealty and military hierarchy, respectively) with the pervasive, exploitative structure of Pakistani Quasi-Feudalism. Defined by the monopoly of land and political influence held by a small percentage of dominant families, Pakistani feudalism sustains a complex hierarchy built on generational debt, dependence, and the subjugation of the peasantry, and crucially, this entrenched socio-economic and political fabric creates profound and systemic educational gaps. By synthesizing the legal challenges, cultural sustaining factors, and direct consequences on the peasantry, this work aims to highlight the urgent need for socio-economic reforms, with the concluding sections proposing actionable strategies for removing these systemic barriers and presenting a clear call to action to address educational inequality rooted in feudal practices.

Keywords: Feudalism, Pakistan, Primary Education, Educational Inequality, Socio-Economic Reforms

Definition, Emergence and Characteristics of Feudalism

Feudalism stands as a pivotal social, economic, and political construct that profoundly shaped numerous societies across different historical epochs, most notably medieval Europe and Japan. Emerging primarily as a response to periods of decentralized authority and the pressing need for security, this system organized societies around land tenure and intricate webs of personal allegiance. Characterized by its unique distribution of power and resources, feudalism wasn't a monolithic entity; rather, it manifested in diverse forms, each reflecting the specific cultural, political, and economic conditions of its region. While sharing fundamental tenets, the nuances between these manifestations—such as the distinct European and Japanese models—reveal the system's adaptable nature. Modern scholarship also engages in considerable debate regarding the precise definition and universal

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applicability of the term 'feudalism' itself, underscoring the complexity inherent in its study. The roots of feudalism are often traced back to the chaos and instability that followed the collapse of centralized imperial rule, particularly in post-Roman Europe during what is sometimes referred to as the Dark Ages. With central governments unable to ensure safety and order, local arrangements based on existing precedents of client-patron relationships emerged as a practical solution for security. This led to a decentralized system where political sovereignty was "parcellized," meaning that the functions of the state were distributed vertically downwards rather than being concentrated in a single central authority. At its core, feudalism revolved around several key elements. Land tenure was paramount, with land grants (fiefs or feuds) forming the basis of power and wealth. A fief was typically granted to a vassal by a lord as a temporary holding in return for services, including counsel, administrative duties, and military service. In exchange for these grants, individuals pledged personal loyalty and military service in a relationship known as vassalage. This system created a complex, often asymmetric, hierarchy with various ranks, from monarchs at the apex to local lords, knights, and noblemen, each owing allegiance and service to their immediate superior. A notable principle in some feudal systems was that "the vassal of my vassal is not my vassal," illustrating the fragmented nature of authority and loyalty. Economically, feudalism was often intertwined with manorialism, a system where peasants (serfs) were tied to the land, providing labor and services to the lord in exchange for protection and the right to cultivate a portion of the land. This intricate web of obligations and dependencies formed the bedrock of feudal society.

European Feudalism



Distribution of Power in European Feudalism

European feudalism, often considered the "classic" model, primarily characterized medieval Western Europe from the 9th to the 15th centuries. This system was built upon a reciprocal relationship between a lord and a vassal, cemented by oaths of fealty and homage. A distinguishing feature of European feudalism was the concept of contractual reciprocity. Vassals pledged military service, counsel, and aid to their lords, who, in turn, were obligated to protect their vassals and grant them fiefs. Crucially, this reciprocal nature often implied a right of resistance by vassals if the lord failed to uphold his end of the agreement, a factor that significantly contributed to the evolution of political institutions and the eventual checks on royal power in Europe. Examples such as the English Magna Carta reflect these principles. Military service, particularly by mounted knights, was the backbone of feudal armies. The fragmentation of power led to a highly decentralized political landscape, with overlapping jurisdictions and limited central authority. It's important to recognize that European feudalism was not a uniform system across the continent. Johan Lau Munkholm points out

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that "several European feudalisms" existed, with diverse institutional arrangements, and some areas of Western civilization were never properly feudalized. Despite these nuances, the European model's emphasis on contractual obligations and fragmented sovereignty shaped the continent's development, laying groundwork for future legal and governmental structures.

Japanese Feudalism



While sharing the overarching theme of land-based power and loyalty, Japanese feudalism developed along a distinct trajectory compared to its European counterpart. Spanning significant periods such as the Kamakura, Muromachi, and Edo eras, Japanese feudalism was primarily characterized by a more pronounced power and status relationship between a patron (lord) and a client (vassal). This relationship fostered a much tighter dependence of the vassal on his lord, often stemming from clan structures where clients were assimilated through symbolic acts like blood-brotherhood. At the political apex, the Shogun, a military dictator, held de facto power, with the Emperor serving largely as a ceremonial figurehead. Beneath the Shogun were the daimyo, powerful feudal lords who commanded their own territories and samurai warriors. The samurai, akin to Europe's knights, adhered to the rigorous moral code of Bushido, emphasizing unwavering loyalty, honor, and martial prowess. Unlike European feudalism, the concept of contractual reciprocity was less prominent; instead, a paternalistic authority from the lord and absolute loyalty from the vassal defined the relationship.. Kubilay Atik's review highlights the peculiarity of Japanese feudalism, noting the different patterns it exhibited across its various historical periods. These differences in administrative and military structures gave Japanese feudalism a form distinct from Europe.

Ambiguous Nature of Feudal System

The concept of "feudalism" itself has been a subject of extensive academic debate, with many modern historians questioning its utility as a universally applicable analytical tool. Scholars like Richard Abels argue that feudalism might be more of a historiographical construct than a uniformly consistent system that existed everywhere with all its attributed characteristics.. Similarly, Alina Cacho Robledo Vega's work reflects this skepticism, highlighting the ongoing discussion about whether the term accurately captures the complexities of diverse historical realities. Elizabeth Brown, for instance, has long argued against the use of the term, calling it a "tyrannical construct". Beyond Europe and Japan, discussions of feudal structures have extended to other regions, such as the Middle East, where scholars have analyzed "feudal political economy" to understand divergent political developments, noting differences in

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state reliance on slave soldiers and landlord political power. Interestingly, in China, a system analogous to feudalism largely disappeared much earlier than in Europe or Japan, indicating a significant divergence in historical development that further complicates any universal definition. In conclusion, while the precise definition and universal application of "feudalism" remain contested, it undeniably represents a significant historical system characterized by decentralized power, land tenure, and intricate personal loyalties. The distinct manifestations of feudalism in Europe and Japan, with their differing emphasis on contractual reciprocity versus paternalistic authority, underscore how local contexts, cultural values, and socio-political dynamics shaped this complex organizational structure. Understanding these various types is crucial for appreciating the rich tapestry of pre-modern history and the diverse paths societies took in their development.

Historical Roots and Development Feudalism in South Asian

Land has always been the spinal cord to subcontinental (indo-pakistani) social structures. Landownership, in turn, ties land to the concept of power, and we can trace back this concept in subcontinental history as a phenomenon even before the strict definition of the 'feudal' system. When we talk about the 'emergence' of feudalism in south asia and particularly the regions that came to be known as Pakistan, we trace back the development and redefinition of the concept of landownership over the years. This historical development spans over ancient India, the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), the *Mansabdari System* in Mughal India (1526-1857) and colonial india (Abbas et al, 2016). Ancient Indian landownership consists of the early vedic (rig vedic) era, when there wasn't any strict concept of permanent land ownership, and the post vedic period. It was the growth of communities that gave land enough value to become a source of wealth and an asset of ownership. The post vedic era, therefore land ownership started off being largely communal. The role of the king and his influence then developed multiple theories regarding this subject, with the first being Manu, who suggested that the king had a right to ownership - which evolved into claiming that the king had *first* right. There were notes from Chinese travelers like Fahien and Hiuen Tsang that confirmed the practice of the land being owned by the king. Over time, however, the concept of individual ownership also grew, like the theories of Narad Muni stating that a family possessing land for three generations acquired legal rights, of the texts of Gautam and many suggesting that land held for a ten years could become a property. These concepts only grew in complexity with the medieval period, which saw intermediate classes of zamindars and farmers gaining fruition. During the Delhi Sultanate and subsequent mughal era, invaders and rulers actively promoted feudalism to consolidate their control over the subcontinent. They used this system to collect taxes (in coin or kind) through feudal lords (Javaid and Ranjha, 2017) who were then responsible with managing and maintaining armed forces to assist the ruling sultan when required, and later on, the ruling mughal emperor. The mughal empire in fact had formalised this into the mansabdari system, which brought in hierarchical ranking and a civil military service system.

Colonial Entrenchment

Following the 1600s, one of the primary ways the British grew in power was through the social and economic maneuvering of these predefined revenue and service systems using the

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lan. This can be seen in the systematization and significant power/class definition of zamindari in the Permanent Settlement by Lord Cornwallis in 1793. This was arguably the strongest and most oppressive form of feudal landlordism, subdivided into the Ryotwari system in madras, bombay and parts of assam, and the Mahalwari system in the gangetic valley, north west provinces, central india and punjab. By the establishment of proper colonial rule post 1857, the British had understood the importance of making these 'fiefs' dependent on central authority rather than independent, loyalty based operation. They also sought significant revenue to run their larger-scale administration, which then reinforced a very traditional European-adjacent feudal system for tax collection throughout the subcontinent. The Permanent Settlement continued to serve them by creating a predictable revenue source and defining a class of zamindars whose land ownership rights made them dependent and obliged to the colonial power. The Settlement system held so strong that it stayed well into the mid 20th century across the subcontinent; only being abolished in east pakistan by 1950, and in west pakistan by 1959. It seems very apparent, therefore, that we have grown used to this system over centuries of generations, and thus naturally resort to it even after independence and the establishment of an Islamic Republic.

Characteristics of Pakistani Feudalism



Distribution of power in Pakistani Feudalism

Feudalism in Pakistan is better described with the term “Quasi-Feudalism”. It refers to the hierarchy established in a region on the basis of land ownership (Amin et. al, 2023). However, it exists in a slightly more complex context as compared to the classic, military-based feudalism of Medieval Europe. In the modern age, while many nations have left this system behind, Pakistan remains shackled to its oppressive nature. In order to break out of this system it is important to understand its nature and its defining traits. Pakistani feudalism is characterized by the monopoly of a few large, dominant, powerful families that own many acres of land in the rural parts of the country, especially Southern Punjab, Sindh and parts of Balochistan. It is important to note that it is a very small percentage of the population that owns this disproportionately large piece of agricultural land (ud Din, 2025). These families are very influential and by using their connections and the votes of the rural masses, they are able to secure seats for themselves in the national and provincial assemblies. Thus, they are able to participate in the law making in the government to first and foremost, secure their position as landlords even if it comes at the expense of the general public. This system is built upon the exploitation of the lower class i.e. the peasantry. Most of the people are forced to work due to bondages and debt. The worker would end up in generational debt due to deliberate miscalculation on the landowner's part. Furthermore, in order to receive rights to work the land, the peasant has to give up a significant portion of the produce in order to keep

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access to the land. This is known as the *batai system* and it creates a dependency between the rural masses and their landlords that is unique to feudalism (Isra, 2024).

Comparison with Other Types of Feudal System

Feature	. European Feudalism	Japanese Feudalism	Pakistani Feudalism
Time Period	Medieval Western Europe (9th to 15th centuries)	Kamakura, Muromachi, and Edo eras	Modern Age (continues to be a dominant factor)
Core Relationship	Lord and Vassal	Patron (Lord/Daimyo) and Client (Vassal/Samurai)	Landlord (Feudal Family) and Peasantry (Lower Class/Peasant)
Basis of Power	Reciprocal oath of fealty and homage; grant of fiefs (land) for military service	Clan structures, blood-brotherhood, and a paternalistic authority model.	Monopoly of land ownership by a few dominant, influential families.
Contractual Reciprocity	Highly prominent (Contractual). Vassals had a right of resistance if the lord failed his duties (e.g., Magna Carta principles).	Less prominent. Defined by absolute loyalty from the vassal and paternalistic authority from the lord.	Non-existent/Exploitative. Based on debt bondage, deliberate miscalculation, and forced dependency for access to work/land.
Political Structure	Highly decentralized with fragmented power, overlapping jurisdictions, and limited central authority.	Centralized de jure under the Emperor (ceremonial), but de facto power held by the Shogun (military dictator).	Exists within a modern democratic/parliamentary system, where landlords use their influence to secure seats and shape legislation.
Military Class	Knights (pledged military service)	Samurai (adhered to Bushido—unwavering loyalty, honor, martial prowess).	N/A (not a military-based system in the classic sense; power is economic/political).

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Defining Characteristic	Contractual obligations and fragmented sovereignty that led to checks on royal power.	Absolute, unwavering loyalty based on status, lineage, and a rigorous code (Bushido).	Exploitation and generational debt of the lower class to maintain the landlord's economic and political dominance.
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Table of Comparison of types of Feudalism

Effects of Feudalism

This feudal system of Pakistan which is characterized by the dominance of a few, hereditary, elite families over the rural economy, political landscape and societal structure, has profound negative effects over the country's development, democracy and social equality. We will discuss the effects of quasi-feudalism on Pakistani politics, economics and societal landscape.

Political Effects

Feudalism in Pakistan is defined by the concentration of land in the hands of a select few, elite families which leads to them building a political monopoly in the region. They form the very backbone of major political parties in Pakistan. These landlords use their connections, influence and massive voter bank of the rural population to secure seats in the national and provincial assemblies, making them primary policy makers (Ali, 2020). They use this power to ensure that no legislation that could potentially harm them, including crucial land reforms, comes to pass or that there are enough loopholes in the law that they could potentially exploit so they can protect their interests and position (Qayyum, 2023). This political power leads to impunity for these landlords. With their many connections and massive wealth, they usually have the local police, bureaucracy and the justice system in their pockets. They make sure that crimes against tenants and their opposition are either not pursued or the decision is favorable to the lords instead (Qayyum, 2023). This creates a sort of immunity from law that allows these lords to create a "state within a state" in their own localities (Ali, 2020). These landlords and their deep pockets and many connections are able to secure seats in the government without any political qualifications, campaigning or good policy making. Their voters do not elect them on the basis of merit either, instead they are coerced to vote under societal pressure of these lords. This undermines and overshadows any genuine democratic candidate who the people might have voted for had not any strings attached. Hence, this concentration of political power leads to the weakening of democracy (Isra, 2024). The prevailing corruption issue in Pakistan can also be tied back to feudalism. When you have these lords that are in politics to further their own agenda and protect their interests, instead of trying to make the lives of the people better, you have government officials with ill intentions. This leads to misallocation of public resources and prioritizing the interests of the elite over the general population.

Economic Effects

Feudalism in Pakistan is identified by the concentration of land ownership among the few elite families which is passed down through generations. Since the size of the land and the

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number of owners is so disproportionate, it leads to inefficiency of land use as most of the land is underutilized. For a country like Pakistan, which is dependent on agriculture, this has major economic drawbacks as more food could be produced on this land which is left untouched. Moreover, the mindset of the landlords is such that they do not want to maximise crop yield as their profit and wealth is not in the actual produce of their land but rather simply the owning of it and the peasantry living on it, who provide cheap labor. Hence, these lords prefer not to even modernize the agriculture process by using machinery and such (Qayyum, 2023). This mass concentration of lands also leads to economic disparity between feudal lords and the rural population. The majority of the population on these lands live on a subsistence level, meaning that they only produce enough food to sustain themselves and there is little to no profit. These people are tied to the land through debt, bondages and sharecropper contracts, meaning, they usually have to give up a portion of their produce to these lords as a form of tax. This increases the economic disparity between the lords and the population as the peasants giving up their produce get poorer and poorer while the lords feed off of the peasantry (Amin et al, 2023). This economic and social disparity is useful to the landowners as it continues this dependency that the peasantry have on them. Hence, these lords discourage investments in development projects in these rural areas including infrastructure and facilities. Should the quality of life for the peasantry improve, it would reduce this dependency and they would break away from their oppression to chase a higher quality of life. It is in the landlord's best interest to keep them ignorant and repressed.

Social Effects

The rigid hierarchical social structure of the feudal lands means that there is a lack of social mobility. This means that the landowners will continue to accumulate wealth while the peasantry remains in poverty despite the effort they put in and the talent they might possess. This is because the feudal lords keep the peasantry under oppression and actively discourage education so the peasantry and tenants remain in ignorance and do not chase the dream of a better life (Qayyum, 2023). A major characteristic of feudalism is the debt and bondages under which the peasantry is bound to the land and its owners. This is a modern form of slavery that these feudal lords take advantage of by underpaying the workers through fraudulent accounting and shady practices. This leads to the workers being forced to work longer than necessary. In many cases, this bondage has lasted several generations (Amin et al, 2023). The patriarchal systems of the feudal lands leads to oppression of women by denying them their right of inheritance of the land. The feudal lords prefer to keep the land intact and within the family. Women inheriting this land means sharing it with the woman's husband and his family. Furthermore, women are subject to forced marriage and honor killings in order to settle disputes and build alliances (Amin et al, 2023).

Case Studies of Feudalism in Pakistan

The structure of feudalism, deeply entrenched by British colonial policy, that selectively granted land for loyalty, managed to survive the post-Partition land reforms largely unscathed, often transforming its outward appearance while retaining its core exploitative power. Despite decades of development, growth, increase in awareness about education, and advancements in the state capacity and control, this archaic system persists in a multitude of

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areas around Pakistan. This deep-seated rule of feudalism in Pakistan, hinders the overall intellectual, economic, and democratic growth of the country. The control of feudalism and its politically significant manifestations are found dominating the agrarian lands of Sindh, along with the arid tracks in Sount Punjab. Here, the longstanding cultural traditions and impunity can be observed through the local case studies.

Concept of Feudalism in South Punjab

In South Punjab, the system of feudalism focuses on the abuse of all power by the landlords, to gain political power and a footing in provincial and national seats. In the conquest for this political power, the local population and peasantry is faced with a decline in their lifestyle, as these people depend on the landlords for the provision of amenities and jobs. Punjab is dominated by the few families prominently including *Qureshi, Gilani, Khar, Makhdoom, Lagahri, Mazari and Khosa* etc. Most of the lands of Southern Punjab are held by these families. Their areas roughly start from Multan and extend up till the boundaries of Sindh and Balochistan. They own the agricultural and industrial sources of economic development in this area, hence the dependence of families on these landlords. As a result, the access to education and literacy is reduced for these people. Case studies in districts like *Muzaffargarh* provide distinct patterns on how the feudal landlords control the public's education

Ghost Schools

Ghost Schools, in which schools are developed on paper for the government funding, appoint teachers through political patronage, which then remain absent and continue to collect the government salaries. This creates a large mass of illiterate, docile peasantry with no political opinions, resulting in them being easy targets for land deals and debt contracts since they cannot read. Furthermore, the same school buildings that have been formed, are utilized by the landlords for livestock sheltering, or as public guest houses, Deras. Clearly, the key method for obstructing education is by actively controlling the establishment and functionality of public schools.

Vehari and Rajanpur

A case study based on the practices in the district of Vehari and Rajanpur in South Punjab, explains the process through which these school systems are occupied. Initially, the government or an NGO starts a project of development of an educational institution, much the pleasure of the local public. The feudal family of the area, then intervenes to claim the chosen land as their own, either by using false claims or by physically occupying the land using their armed guards (lath-bardar). Once the school is established on the land owned by the landlords, the 'ghost' teachers are appointed, based on their loyalty to the landlords, which further discourages the public from sending their children, due to low quality teaching or absenteeism. This building may further be used for their local elections, also controlled by the feudal landlords, storage or livestock shelter. The main goal of the feudal landlords is perpetuating dependency of the public upon themselves. If the public is not educated, aware and politically conscious, they are powerless in terms of clashing with the landlords. By blocking the public's source of awareness, they also secure a labour force of illiterate peasant families (haris), by guaranteeing them food, protection, and resources.

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Sindh

Wadera System

In rural Sindh, the manifestation of feudalism is especially severe, where the dominant landlords are Waderas. The Wadera system particularly exploits the extreme deprivation of resources, chronic poverty and debt of the peasants (Haris), in order to control their education through two main factors: Labor and the overall lack of infrastructure.

Thatta and Badin

Districts of Thatta and Badin have constantly shown the prevalence of bonded labour, and its weaponization as the single greatest obstacle to enrolment in educational institutions.

Bonded Families

Peasant families are first trapped in debt, and due to the overall chronic poverty of the land, they fail at providing the debt amount, resulting in a generational entrapment in the cycle of increasing debt. Due to the threats by the feudal landlords, peasants must involve their entire families, even the young school-age children to work in the fields and brick kilns, to help in paying their due debt. Hence, children spend their formative years, working as underpaid labourers, resulting in zero education and intellectual development. As a result, they become the perfect docile workers, indebted to the feudal landlords, repeating the cycle of generational debt. The common problem of poor school quality, crumbling buildings, lack of teaching facilities, and overall exploitation of educational buildings by the feudal landlords for their own use, further adds onto the perpetuation of the Waderas powers. The high rates of illiteracy in rural Sindh are direct consequences of a system that deprives the working majority, of their economic autonomy and their children's right to an education, effectively maintaining the Wadera as the sole intellectual and economic authority.

Synthesis

The persistence of feudalism in Pakistan, especially South Punjab and Sindh, showcases how, even though the mainly populated and important areas of Pakistan may have reached a level of literacy and intellectualism, most of the less populated areas of the country still continue to live within the shackles of the feudalistic lords, who have found that controlling education is the easiest way towards controlling the whole of the public and peasant families, along with their lands. The suppression of literacy ensures a pliable, dependent voter and labor base, further helping the cycle of servitude. Dismantling this system requires not just political and judicial reform, but a state-led effort to provide educational access, ensuring that rural children can attend functional, well-resourced schools free from the interference of local landlords.

Culture Sustaining Feudal Practices

Socio-Economic Fabric of Pakistan

The social boundaries and customs that have been established between the upper economic class and the lower economic class tends to mimic the classical image of feudalism. The traditions and customs that have been presented in the feudal systems of historic Pakistan and India still sustain themselves to the present day. The characteristics are listed but not limited to:

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- The severe reliance of the poor (equivalent to the peasantry) on the economic upper class (equivalent to the Feudal Lord) for employment and job opportunities
- The upper class forming monopolies over certain types of jobs.
- The upper class exploiting the fact that the lower class has no option but to be employed by them.

Neo-Feudalism

The transition of feudal lordship towards capitalist forms of authority and enterprise began during the British administration and continued well after the partition of the subcontinent after 1947 (Amin and Gillani, 2023). This evolution in political and economic frameworks recontextualises the behaviour and perception of traditional subcontinental feudalism. Neo-feudalism essentially defines the re-emergence of feudal-like structures and power dynamics in contemporary societies. Unlike historical, medieval European ideals of feudalism, it doesn't represent a direct return to authority but rather an adaptation of its core characteristics to modern contexts. Scholars often use terms like "refeudalisation", "neo-medievalism" or "techno-feudalism" interchangeably to explain this concept (Krieken, 2023). Neo-feudalism signifies increasing inequality and re-establishment of relationships based on allegiance and dependence rather than universal laws or rights. Jodi Dean articulates neo-feudalism as 'a mode of production where traditional capitalist drivers like profit and competitive advantage are supplanted by strategies involving rents, destruction, and hoarding, often enforced through extra-economic coercion' thereby creating a social system pivoted on privilege and dependence, where capitalist laws coexist with non-capitalist behaviours (Dean, 2024). Pakistan has retained its colonised feudal mindset that preceded centuries before its independence as a state. The traditional feudal structure based on landownership as a fundamental source of power, with titled landlords (Chaudhary, Warraich, Pir, Khan, Makhdoom etc) being actors with direct influence into governance (particularly in more ruralised regions, and with a higher concentration in the south), typically through a generational history of land ownership. What is important to understand is that this power has not remained static, but has evolved and integrated with other powerful socio-political facets like the military, bureaucracy, and industrial elites, to form strong coalitions to "preserve the system" (Amin and Gillani, 2023). These alliances pave the path for the 'landed elite' to gain disproportionate personal capital benefits from modernisation projects.

An example of this is how new roads intended for public benefit have been exploited by large landowners to convert agricultural land into lucrative real estate projects, leading to the dispossession of landless sharecroppers and small peasants (Geiser, 2020, Khan and Azhar, 2024). Currently, a significant portion of Pakistani households (25%) own all the land. (Amin and Gillani, 2023). This exhibits the fluidity and adaptability of the feudal concept and mindset, and how it lets modern socio-institutional structures enable landowning elites to repurpose public development for their private gain – with influence that is implicitly understood to override formal political institutions (Albrecht & Andersen, 2013; Andersen & Andersen, 2013): a traditional system retrofitted to a newer capitalist structure, organically adapted to Pakistan's historical and cultural feudal mindset.

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Education in Pakistan

Education in Pakistan is delivered through a complex multi-tiered system involving federal institutions, provincial departments, local administrations, and a sizable private sector. The federal government provides broad policy guidance and standards; the provinces are principally responsible for delivering schooling and enacting enabling laws. Punjab, as Pakistan's most populous province, plays a pivotal role in education outcomes and policy experimentation. This paper reviews legal foundations, assesses implementation using recent data and policy documents, and proposes reforms to close the gap between law and practices.

Structure of Education

The schooling structure is typically described in six levels:

- Pre-primary (early childhood)
- Primary (grades 1–5)
- Middle (grades 6–8)
- Secondary (grades 9–10, leading to SSC)
- Higher secondary / Intermediate (11–12, HSSC)
- Tertiary and technical education

Governance flows from the Ministry of Federal Education (policy & standards), provincial School Education Departments (delivery, staffing, infrastructure), district education authorities (operational oversight), and a large non-state sector including private schools and NGOs. Enrollment, learning outcomes, teacher distribution and infrastructure quality vary markedly by province and urban/rural location. Recent national statistical reports provide the best available cross-province comparisons.

Legal Framework in Punjab

Constitutional Foundation: Article 25A

Article 25A of the Constitution requires the State to provide free and compulsory education for children aged 5–16. This constitutional mandate underpins provincial laws and policy priorities.

Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2014

Punjab operationalized Article 25A through the Punjab Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2014 (Act XXVI of 2014). The Act establishes the legal right to free and compulsory primary and middle education, defines obligations of provincial and district authorities, prescribes minimum standards, and creates mechanisms for school registration, monitoring, and penalties for non-compliance. The Act extends across all districts of Punjab and provided the statutory basis for subsequent rules and policies.

Rules and Recent Policy Instruments (2019–2024)

Punjab has developed implementing rules and policies to operationalize the Act, including the Punjab Free & Compulsory Education Rules (periodic revisions), the Punjab Education Sector Plan (2019–20 to 2023–24) which lays out strategic goals and reform priorities, and a

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set of 2024 policy instruments (e.g., School Management Councils Policy, E-Transfer Policy) to improve governance and transparency. The provincial Schools Department web portal documents these policies.

Legal Framework in Sindh

Constitutional Foundation: Article 25A

Article 25A of the Constitution requires the State to provide free and compulsory education for children aged 5–16. Sindh, after the 18th Constitutional Amendment, established its own legislative and administrative framework to implement this constitutional obligation.

Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2013

Sindh operationalized Article 25A through the Sindh Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act, 2013. The Act guarantees the right to free and compulsory schooling for children aged 5–16, sets out the duties of provincial and district authorities, defines school registration and monitoring procedures, and outlines obligations for teachers and school administrators. It also provides mechanisms for grievance redressal and penalties for non-compliance. The Act applies across all districts of Sindh and forms the statutory basis for subsequent policies and rules.

Rules and Recent Policy Instruments (2019–2024)

Sindh has issued a series of rules and policy instruments to operationalize the 2013 Act. These include the Sindh Free and Compulsory Education Rules, periodic administrative guidelines, and the Sindh Education Sector Plan and Roadmap (2019–2024), which outlines reform priorities and implementation strategies. Additional instruments include updated teacher recruitment and transfer policies, digital governance initiatives to improve transparency, and School Management Committee frameworks to strengthen school-level participation and oversight.

Legal Framework in Gilgit Baltistan

Constitutional Foundation: Article 25A

Article 25A provides the overarching constitutional requirement for free and compulsory education for children aged 5–16. Gilgit-Baltistan, governed under its own administrative order, aligns its educational policies with this constitutional mandate and has established regional laws and directives accordingly.

Gilgit-Baltistan Compulsory Education Act, 2016

Gilgit-Baltistan implemented Article 25A through the Gilgit-Baltistan Compulsory Education Act, 2016. The Act ensures the right to free and compulsory education for all children aged 5–16, outlines the responsibilities of the Education Department and district administrations, and regulates school registration and monitoring. It prescribes teacher duties, establishes minimum standards, and provides penalties for non-compliance. The Act applies across all districts of Gilgit-Baltistan and serves as the legal foundation for subsequent education policies.

Rules and Recent Policy Instruments (2019–2024)

To support the implementation of the 2016 Act, Gilgit-Baltistan has introduced several policy measures, including the regional Education Strategy, teacher recruitment and transfer frameworks, digital monitoring and school information systems, and guidelines for School Management Committees. These instruments aim to improve access, strengthen governance, enhance quality, and align regional education reforms with national and global commitments.

Current Challenges

Access and Out-of-School Children (OOSC)

Despite laws guaranteeing schooling, out-of-school rates and regional disparities persist. National surveys and Pakistan Education Statistics show enrollment and completion gaps at primary and middle levels, with rural areas and poorer districts lagging. The challenge is both demand-side (poverty, child labor, attitudes toward girls' schooling in some areas) and supply-side (school availability, infrastructure, teacher shortages).

Funding and Resource Constraints

Public spending on education in Pakistan has historically been low as a share of GDP and government budgets. Under-funding affects maintenance of school buildings, hiring and training of teachers, and availability of learning materials. Punjab's sector plans acknowledge funding constraints and propose resource reallocation and efficiency measures, but budget execution and the adequacy of allocations remain issues.

Quality and Learning Outcomes

Learning outcomes, measured by national and independent assessments, reveal low foundational literacy and numeracy for many children. Teacher absenteeism, lack of continuous professional development, and large class sizes contribute to weak learning outcomes. The Punjab Education Sector Plan highlights teacher licensing and standards development as priority reforms.

Governance and Accountability

Weak enforcement of existing laws and inconsistent district-level capacity undermine the right to education. Registration and monitoring mechanisms exist on paper (school registration provisions, inspection systems), but implementation is uneven. Civil society (e.g., ASER, NGOs) has played a role in monitoring, but systemic accountability reforms are still needed.

Education under Feudalism

Education under feudalism has several aspects and nuances to it. Despite education being a basic right of every citizen in Pakistan, the peasantry under Feudalism is unable to meet to exercise this right properly. Let us discuss why this situation arises.

Causes of Educational Gaps

Loss of Control

The Feudal Lord establishes control by establishing fear within the peasantry beneath it. This

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instilled fear which is often ingrained and generational may start to falter if the peasantry is educated.

Migration

Education gives opportunities to people that they otherwise may not have. If the peasantry is educated, they may use their new gained knowledge to escape feudalism. By robbing them of their right to education, their means of escape is also stunted.

Generational Slavery

If the peasantry is able to escape the feudal family, no peasantry will be left to serve the feudal lord hence will end the generational slavery. This is not favorable to the feudal lord.

Culture and Traditions

The Feudal Families have created this mindset of slavery and comfort within that slavery that traps the peasantry within these systems of oppression that they often times are conditioned to not leave.

Teaching Practical Skills

Feudal Lords may teach the peasantry several practical skills till the extent that they are able to perform well for the feudal lord. The question now arises that if the peasantry has practical skills that they can use to be employed elsewhere, why don't they escape feudalism? This is the struggle the peasantry has been fighting.

The Struggle of the Peasantry

We can see in several parts of Pakistan where perhaps the classical look of feudalism does not exist but its several characteristics may emerge. The slave mindset that has been instilled in the peasant families has not been able to escape them. Despite the fact that Feudalism is not prevalent in prominent parts of Pakistan, the diluted version of it as discussed in section 4.1 still holds a mental barrier for the peasantry. The culture, tradition and ideals presented in the feudal system still haunt the Lower class that once used to be its peasantry. The most OOSC tend to be upon primary and middle education mostly which is alarming as this is the basic level of education needed.

Overcoming Educational Challenges

Gilgit Baltistan

Despite falling under the stereotypical geographical and historical definition of the areas prone to being under the feudalistic rule, Gilgit Baltistan surprisingly has a relatively high literacy rate, often attributed to several unique factors. The high literacy rate is especially found within the Hunza and Diamer Districts. For instance, the female youth literacy rate in Hunza has been reported to be near 98.6%.

Role of Non-Government Organizations (NGOs)

The Agha Khan Development Network, plays a pivotal role in the spread of education in this region, through multiple organizations and services. The establishment of various private

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schools, especially for girls, led by Agha Khan Foundation, reportedly contributed to the majority of the educational infrastructure.

Community and Cultural Value

One of the major reasons behind the emphasis on education in this region, are their cultural and religious values. Particularly, the Ismaili Muslims of the community place a strong religious and cultural value upon acquiring education, including that of women. Community participation and village organizations itself helped in developmental planning of education.

Education for Social Mobility

The mountainous terrain and the remote geographical location result in reduced educational and economic opportunities for development, as a result the value for available education and the strive for further development increases and education is seen as a primary pathway to social mobility and securing jobs.

Removing Socio Economic Barriers

As the upper case study shows, despite the societal values and traditions that have been generationally integrated into society, they can still be escaped through local empowerment and an understanding of why knowledge and education is important. If a similar mindset can be stimulated in other regions of Pakistan that are being plagued by feudalism and neo feudalism and its other diluted forms, then this backward mindset can naturally be drained. If culture is what is sustaining these practices, then the factors that sustain that culture should be targeted. The upper class has such a strong grasp on several institutes of its locality that measures need to be taken to mitigate these dramatic economic gaps. These measures may include:

Demonopolize the Monopolizing Upper Class

The upper class in Pakistan has several holdings on several industries, institutes and even the government. This disproportionate power balance leads to these few families creating strong monopolies which harm the general public.

Empowering the Lower Class

Using Gilgit Baltistan as an example and using their local empowerment to stimulate growth, achievement and collective effort may allow the lower class to break the mental cycle of slavery that has been ingrained in them generationally.

Call To Action

The findings of this study confirm that the pervasive structure of Pakistani Quasi-Feudalism—rooted in land monopoly, political manipulation, and the subjugation of the peasantry through generational debt—functions as the single greatest impediment to achieving universal, compulsory education. The constitutional promise of Article 25A remains hollow in rural strongholds where feudal lords actively profit from the illiteracy and dependency of the masses. Overcoming these entrenched educational challenges demands a multi-pronged intervention that is as bold as the problem is pervasive. The study proposes

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the following immediate and long-term actions to dismantle the systemic barriers to education:

Enforce Legal Frameworks with Zero Tolerance

The implementation gap between the legal text (e.g., the Punjab and Sindh Free and Compulsory Education Acts) and the ground reality must be closed.

Mandatory Enrollment Audits

Provincial governments must conduct aggressive, third-party enrollment audits in districts flagged in the case studies (e.g., Southern Punjab, Thatta, Badin).

Accountability for 'Ghost Schools'

Civil and criminal prosecution must be initiated against officials and local figures responsible for operating 'Ghost Schools'—a practice that drains public funds while sustaining darkness in rural communities.

Judicial Activism

The judiciary must proactively treat the denial of education due to forced labor or debt bondage as a fundamental rights violation, ensuring prompt legal relief and protective measures for children of bonded families.

Radical Land and Economic Reform

True educational access cannot exist without economic freedom. The monopoly of land must be challenged to break the cycle of dependency that underpins the feudal structure.

Progressive Land Taxation

Implement steep, progressive land taxes on large landholdings to disincentivize vast, underutilized estates and generate revenue specifically earmarked for rural education infrastructure.

Debt Abolition

Initiate targeted, government-backed schemes to eliminate the generational debt of bonded labor families, providing them with the economic mobility necessary to prioritize their children's education over forced labor.

Investment in Skills and Diversification

Shift rural development focus from purely agrarian dependency to teaching practical, marketable skills. This provides the peasantry with non-feudal employment options, empowering them to migrate from exploitative systems.

Community Empowerment and Decentralization

The power over education must be irrevocably shifted from the landlord's dominion to the community's hands.

School Management Committees (SMCs) with Autonomy

Empower local SMCs with real budgetary and hiring authority, ensuring representation is drawn primarily from the non-feudal, peasant class, thus making schools truly accountable to the workers, not the Wadera.

Learning from Gilgit Baltistan

The successful model of community ownership and high enrollment rates in Gilgit Baltistan must be studied, adapted, and aggressively deployed in the feudal-dominated plains of Sindh and Punjab. This is not merely an educational challenge; it is a structural crisis of governance, justice, and human dignity. We urge policymakers, civil society, and the youth of Pakistan to

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move beyond rhetoric and demand the courageous legislative and economic reforms required to end the educational apartheid sustained by feudalism. The future of Pakistan depends on breaking the shackles of debt and illiteracy, one enlightened generation at a time.

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