

FEUDALISM IN PAKISTAN: MYTH OR REALITY/CHALLENGES TO FEUDALISM

Abstract

Feudalism is a system of landownership by superior classes in special relation to the royal or state power. Its a system of receiving land from a king and in return working and fighting for him. The feudal system revolves not around the matriarchal system but around the patriarchal system of family in which the male head takes care of the family, which is commonly a large joint family, and looks after the land he owns in inheritance. Feudalism in Pakistan, which is a descendent of Indian feudalism, has its roots and characteristics entrenched in local history (such as the influence and intent of invaders) and society (such as the social structure), though there might be certain similarities between Medieval Europe and Medieval India in the realm of feudalism. Land reforms are a method to reallocate rights to distribute land more equitably. In Pakistan, land reforms introduced in 1959 made the ceiling of ownership at 500 acres of irrigated land and 1000 acres of non-irrigated land or 36.000 produce index units. The paper examines the decline of feudalism in Pakistan and also discusses the major challenges to feudalism in India and Pakistan.

Key Words: Feudalism, Pakistan, India, Land Reforms, Agriculture.

Introduction

Feudalism is a system of receiving land from a king and in return working and fighting for him (Oxford learner's dictionary, 2014). Feudalism is also defined by a system of landownership by superior classes in special relation to the royal or state power (Kosambi, 1956). A feudal had to collect tax whether in coin or in kind on the behalf of the state and deposit it in the royal exchequer. Moreover, a feudal had to cultivate an army which could help the state whenever required. A feudal was answerable to the central authority and not to the peasants or to the members of the villages inhabiting his fief (Pearson, 1989a & 1989b). The Sultans of Delhi, the Mughals and the British, who invaded, occupied and ruled over the subcontinent, promoted feudalism in the subcontinent to hold their foot on it. The rebellion of 1857 made the British realize that the fiefs should not stay independent of the central authority. Instead, they should be made dependent on the central authority (Kosambi, 1956). Further, the British needed revenue to run

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the state affairs. During the British reign, the process of the conversion of feudal lords into capitalists began and the same continued after the partition of the subcontinent in 1947 (Sharma, 1985).

In Pakistan, the feudal are known as Chaudharies, Warraich, Pirs, Khans, Makhdoods, Arbabs, Mizaris, Khars, Legharis, Nawabzadas, Nawabs, Sardars and Shahs (Anwar, 2013). No province of Pakistan is immune to feudalism whether it exists in the form of Zamindars, tribal chiefs or Pirs (Ali, 1989). The outward manifestations of feudalism are big lands, peasants and private jails in rural areas and spacious houses and luxurious life style in urban areas. In Pakistan, feudalism is recognized by its certain facets ranging from the oppression of women to the oppression of the peasantry. Women bear the brunt of feudalism when women from the feudal sphere are denied not only the rights of inheritance of property but also the rights of getting married. Instead, they are forced to marry with Koran and in this way, her part of share in the land does not go anywhere; it stays with the male members of a family (Siddiqi, 2014).

The feudal system revolves not around the matriarchal system but around the patriarchal system of family in which the male head takes care of the family, which is commonly a large joint family, and looks after the land he owns in inheritance (Anwar, 2013; Siddiqi, 2014). Further, the eldest of the family secure more rights than the youngest of the family in matters of decision. In Medieval Europe, there was a structured dependence of the peasantry on the lords whereas in Medieval India (pre-colonial Indian society) the peasantry was comparatively independent (Mukhia, 2008). Hence, it is difficult to compare the medieval age of Europe and the Indian subcontinent. Feudalism in Pakistan, which is a descendent of Indian feudalism, has its roots and characteristics entrenched in local history (such as the influence and intent of invaders) and society (such as the social structure), though there might be certain similarities between Medieval Europe and Medieval India in the realm of feudalism (Sobhan, 1993).

Whereas Jamshed Dasti's electoral win in 2013 against Ghulam Noor Rabbani Khar, a member of the Khar (feudal) family from Muzzafargarh, Punjab, for the National Assembly of Pakistan (Javed, 2014), delineates the fact that feudalism is on the decline in Pakistan, the chopping of both the arms of 10-year-old Tabassam Iqbal by a land lord's son, Ghulam Mustafa, in Chak Bhola, Punjab, in August 2014, indicates the fact that feudalism is still surviving in Pakistan (Mustafa, 2014). The aim of this paper to weigh which aspect, myth or reality, overwhelms.

Land reforms neutralizing feudalism

Land reforms are a method to reallocate rights to distribute land more equitably (Griffin, Khan & Ickowitz, 2002). In India, in 1961, there were two aims of the abolition of feudalism (or the Zamindari system) through land reforms (Appu, 1996). As large land holdings were considered responsible for low agriculture produce, the first aim was to divide these holdings into smaller one with more number of ownership to enhance the production of agro products such as grain and cotton. As large land holdings were considered a source of exploitation of the peasantry leading to social injustice, the second aim was to provide equality of status and opportunities to the peasantry to excel in their lives. In the case of India, it seems that socialism (under the influence of Karl Marx ideology) was the prime

force and not industrialization (Besley & Burgess, 2000). In the case of Pakistan, efforts to industrialize the country started under the regime of General Ayub Khan in the 1960s. This could be construed as an indirect message to large land holders to increase the agriculture produce to meet the demand of the industry which was overwhelmingly agro-based. Secondly, in the case of Pakistan, the slogan of *Roti, Kapri aur Makkan* (Food, clothing and shelter) raised by Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto, along with the promise to do land reforms, could also be termed an attempt to follow to footsteps of socialism to charm the voters in the elections of 1971 (Herring, 1979; Anwar, 2013). This point shows that the real effort to reduce Pakistani version of the Zamindari system started in 1971 by making the slogan public and raising the expectations of the voters, though the point of increasing the agriculture produce was implied. The hope of land reforms attracted those who were living in rural areas of Pakistan and in that sense about 80% of Pakistan's population was residing in rural areas. Bhutto won the elections (Herring, 1979).

In Pakistan, land reforms introduced in 1959 made the ceiling of ownership at 500 acres of irrigated land and 1000 acres of non-irrigated land or 36.000 produce index units. Land reforms introduced in 1972 reduced the ceiling of ownership to 150 acres of irrigated land and 300 acres of non-irrigated land or 12.000 plus produce index units. Land reforms introduced in 1977 further reduced the ceiling of ownership to 100 acres of irrigated land and 200 acres of non-irrigated land or 8.000 plus produce index units (Farani, 2005; Butt, 2014). Though each time, exemptions and compensations were given to land owners, land reforms produced their effects. Moreover, tenants were granted certain rights which could protect their interests. For instance, they could not be ejected from the land without a prior notice and they were given the right to buy the land as the first candidate if the land owner wanted to sell the land (Naqvi, Khan & Chaudhry, 1987). The government also distributed land among tenants free of cost. For instance, in the case of 1972 land reforms alone, the areas of the land was seized was more than one million acres and out of it about 0.9 million acres was distributed amongst 76,000 peasants (Kapoor, 2015). It is still said that some large land owners became able to save their lands by exploiting lacunas existing in the law and that these land reforms could not be implemented uniformly throughout the country (Naqvi, Khan & Chaudhry, 1987). As per an estimate, 0.3% people in Pakistan still hold 30% of its land (Kapoor, 2015).

The question is this: what was the actual goal of land reforms: if it was to undermine feudalism or to empower the peasantry. Whether the peasantry was empowered at the cost of feudal lords? Was the objective of land reforms to increase the yield of agriculture by making the underutilized land utilized? The reason why tenants cannot prosper vis-à-vis the large land owners is that they cannot afford the cost of mechanization and pesticides. Further, they remain prone to natural disaster such as drought or floods. In contrast, a large land owner can withstand their economic and natural problems in a better way (Nabi, Hamid & Zahid, 1986). As per an estimate, more than one fourth population living in rural area of Pakistan is landless (DWP, 2001). Now, the point is if the myth of feudalism is broken by reducing the land owned by large land owners or by granting the land to the landless. There are pros and cons of holding large land and small land (Parik & Shah, 1995). Feudalism hurts those who are not peasants when

feudal lords become part of the electoral system and get elected as legislators (Sayeed, 1980). The ensuing legislation is bound to protect the political and economic interests of feudalism, whether or not it safeguards the interests of common man. For instance, the absence of agriculture tax is a case in point (Anwar, 2013).

Myth or reality

There are two schools of thought commenting on feudalism. One school of thought says that feudalism is just a myth because after the introduction of land reforms, not much land is left with the feudal class, if the holding of certain area of land were the measure to judge one's feudal status. However, the other school of thought says that feudalism is still a reality because the feudal class has managed to deal with the land reforms by saving its fertile land on which it now banks on.

The feudalism of today is faced with numerous challenges. The first challenge comes from capitalization coupled with industrialization (Jalal, 1990). There are more chances to earn money through the industrial sector than through agriculture produce existing in the raw form. To establish even an agro based industry to produce a processed agriculture product, capital is required which is got either by putting the land on lease to some bank or by straightaway selling the land (Naqvi, Khan & Chaudhry, 1987). No doubt, instances have been reported when banks forwarded loans and later wrote them off, instance have also been reported when large land owners thought it better to sell a part of their land to earn money to establish an industrial unit by either switching over from being agriculturist to industrialist or becoming an agriculturalist-cum-industrialist. The industrialization in the 1960s also brought into the fore an urban-based industrial class which over the years started posing both economic and political challenges to the overwhelmingly rural based feudal class. For instance, even small industrial units in Karachi started earning more money per year than that of big land lords of inner Sindh (Zaidi, 1999).

The second challenge comes from the movements of human rights which are expressed in the form of women rights, labour rights and children rights. These movements of rights have their roots in democratic awareness of people chanting slogans of liberty, freedom and freewill (Prosterman & Riedinger, 1987). Since its inception in 1947, Pakistan's association with capitalist countries (vis-à-vis socialist countries) has opened Pakistan to these movements launched directly through its own people or indirectly through non-government organisation (NGOs) funded by the western capitalist countries (Gazdar, 2006). These movements revolving around the concept of "empowerment" of various sections of society have found a ground fertile in Pakistan because Pakistan itself was founded on the chants of Muslim empowerment (Zaidi, 1999). The concept of empowerment has not only started challenging feudalism from outside, that is, through state machinery or the media, but also through inside by making the peasantry conscious of its rights and revolting to any step meant to oppress the peasants (Wright & Wolford, 2003). The growing awareness of their oppression and their reciprocal rights in the peasantry and those inhabiting the rural areas of Pakistan was aptly cashed in on by Bhutto in the 1970s. Bhutto, who himself was a feudal, became the national political leader and the phenomenon of his quick political rise

against the established political and electoral constituencies based on feudal power gave a message to the feudal class that the peasantry was on a course different from them (Herring, 1979). Consequently, the feudal class is found to have shed many of its oppressive measures against the peasantry and in many instances has tried to appease the peasantry to fetch votes.

The third challenge comes from education. The feudal class is known for seeking education at elite educational institutes of the country such as the Aitchison College Lahore and abroad such as the University of Oxford, UK (Boone, 2014). The feudal class is also known for its proclivity for not establishing schools and colleges in its area of influence (Sayeed, 1980). It is said that the establishment of educational institutes is discouraged lest the peasantry get educated and come on par socially or economically with the feudal class one day (Zaidi, 1999). Since the inception of Pakistan in 1947, the interest of people, whether living in urban or rural areas, in seeking education has arisen. The rise in the concern has spontaneously decreased the sphere of influence of the feudal class both socially and politically. The pinnacle of the pro-education preference of people has been translated through the recently (in 2010) passed 18th Constitutional Amendment, Article 25-A of which enjoins upon the federal government to provide education compulsorily to every child of age from five to sixteen years free of cost (Siddique, 2010). Over the years, education, especially in the realm of professional and skilled, has empowered its seekers to live a life independent of the clutches of the feudal class. The point here is not to challenge the feudal class on its powers but to live independent of the diktat of the feudal class in the rural areas.

The fourth challenge has come from the media, both print and electronic. Over the years, the media has not only tried to empower the common man but it has also resorted to challenge the authority and domain of politicians, whether they belong to the feudal or industrial class (Syed, 2013). Since the rise of the electronic media after 2001, the general awareness of people, living in both rural and urban areas, have arisen and more mouth pieces are now available to speak for their rights and against the oppression inflicted by the feudal class on the segment of society under its influence (Lieven, 2011). On the tide of the electronic media, new political parties and independent electoral candidates representing the middle class have surfaced in the recent general elections of 2013. Though the phenomenon of such a rise was more prominent in the urban section of society than in the rural one, the reach of the middle class has also been witnessed to the rural areas of both Punjab and Khyber Pakhtoon Khawa politically. In Sindh, the Urdu speaking middle class has already been active politically since the 1980s. The educated middle class has also been found active in Balochistan especially after 2001, not listening to the Baloch sardars, and has been asking for the Baloch rights.

The fifth challenge has come from the state. In the past, a feudal lord could violate law or commit a crime as heinous as murder and do away with it (Sayeed, 1980) but until now. The state institutions such as the judiciary and the police have gone stronger than before to challenge the authoritative domain of the feudal class. The murder of Shahzeb Khan, a 20-year-old boy, in December 2012, in Karachi by Shahrugh Jatoi and Siraj Talpur, who belonged to the feudal families of Sindh, is again a case in point when under pressure exerted by the state the offenders had to surrender to the police. They were awarded the death sentence by the judiciary, the

anti-terrorist court (Baloch, 2013). Similarly, the army has gone so strong that the feudal lords tend to foster amicable relations with it and not vice versa. The history of Pakistan is a witness to this phenomenon as well.

Conclusion

Both individually and collectively, all these challenges taking on feudalism indicate that feudalism could be a reality in the past but now it is on the wane, even if it has not become a myth. Further, the way feudalism is receding in both its appearance and authority; the time is not far when it will become a myth. Still the relatively preserved section of the feudal class is feudal-pir families who find the alms donated by their disciples fulfilling their economic needs and the zeal showered on them keeping them politically strong (Siddiqi, 2014). However, there have been found instances when disciples shower their affection on a pir (called the *Gaddi Nasheen*) but vote for a politician opposed by the pir, for instance in Multan (Tunio, 2011). Though these instances are not common but these are there to indicate about the possibilities for the people coming out of the blind following of their pirs, when these people, as voters, have to make a political or electoral decision. It seems that such disciples think that they have gone worldly wiser than their pirs and they have all rights to make political choices of their liking. This change can be safely attributed to political awareness caused by education and the media.

It is also said that the so far imposed land reforms have brought about limited results (Naqvi, Khan & Chaudhry, 1987). In other words, the land reforms have not reduced the influence of the feudal class in society, though it was expected that land reforms held the potential of alleviating poverty from society (Besley & Burgess, 2000). Over the years, it has been seen that the feudal class has lost its flair of authoritarianism and has shrunk to its size owing to a multitude of factors challenging its authority in society – and the process is continued unabated.

One major objection on the feudal class is that since it is involved in agriculture it does not let agriculture tax be imposed on it (Naqvi, Khan & Chaudhry, 1987). The issue of agriculture tax should be studied in depth to see if the imposition hurts the small farmer or not, as it is said that the small farmer will bear the brunt of the agriculture tax and the large land owner who has already facilities to resorting to mechanization of farming will escape unhurt.

One major negative impression of the feudal class gone to the public at large is their ability to side with any martial law imposed in the country. In this way, the feudal class is considered opportunist which joins any hub of power taking hold on the country (Siddiqi, 2007). Further, the feudal class joins any mainstream political party and is prone to switching loyalties thereby wrecking the political culture of Pakistan. Currently, about two-thirds of the lower house of the parliament is stuffed with the members of the feudal class (Anwar, 2013).

An interesting phenomenon has been found in Pakistan. Industrial tycoons originating from the urban sections of society and the middle class businessman who somehow gather sufficient wealth tend to buy agriculture land in the rural areas and try to become feudal in their behaviour and approach (Sayeed, 1980; Jalal, 1990). This point shows that people in general have idolized feudalism and

try to replicate the same whenever find a chance. This point also gives strength to the perception that feudalism is more a mindset than anything else.

Generally, a feudal class exists in all countries even those who have gone capitalist and industrialist (Brinkley, 2010). The problem should not be with the existence of the feudal class in Pakistan but whether or not the class impedes social growth and impinge on human rights. In the latter case, there should have been no problem with the existence of the feudal class.

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