

Land Revenue Systems in South Asia: A Comparative Legal and Institutional Study of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh

¹Muhammad Shahrukh and ²Dr. Ghulam Mustafa*

1. PhD Scholar, Department of International Relations, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan.
2. Associate Professor, Department of International Relations, Government College University Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan

***Corresponding Author:** ghulammustafa@gcuf.edu.pk

Abstract

The main objective of this research is to provide a comparative analysis of Land Revenue Systems in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh by shedding light on their historical legacies, governance mechanisms, legal frameworks, and future reform strategies. Despite sharing a common history of British legacy, each country introduced divergent post-independence land reforms with varying degrees of success; India and Bangladesh introduced tenant-friendly reforms, whereas, Pakistan continued to keep itself in the chains of feudal lord culture. The research adopts a historical-institutional approach, adhering to a qualitative methodology and document analysis. Sampling encompasses the evaluation of the laws of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. Key findings highlight that Bangladesh and India have advanced equitable land redistribution policies through various initiatives, whereas Pakistan's reforms were inhibited by elite capture. *Ergo*, the study recommends adaption to best international land revenue practices, digitization of land records, robust tenancy protections, advanced land-ownership initiatives, and cross-border policy.

Key Words: Agrarian Inequality, Colonial Legacy, Digitization, Land Revenue Systems

Introduction

Guaranteeing Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh were once territories of pre-Partition India, and share considerable historical, cultural, linguistic, and economic links, especially in the field of agriculture. Historically, these systems have functioned as instruments of taxation, tenure regulation, and land control, and have shaped ownership patterns and rural livelihoods significantly (Ghosh, 2023). British colonial policies entrenched bureaucratic agrarian structures, a significant part of which still survives today.

After independence, the three countries each were motivated to pursue different kinds of land reform. India enacted sweeping reforms to eliminate landlordism, secure the rights of tenants, and redistribute land. Bangladesh did the same after 1971, passing the same types of laws, capping landholdings to avoid the re-accumulation of large estates. Pakistan's land reform efforts were much more modest on the other hand, and continued land-lord hegemony in the face of legal and political resistance.

Progress has been aided by recent reforms toward transparency and administrative efficiency through land digitization and governance initiatives. But problems like land fragmentation, insecurity of tenancies, red tape, corruption and elite capture still exist. Therefore, a comparative study of the land revenue systems of these countries is necessary to evaluate historical policies, understand best practices, and suggest ways to achieve governance that is more equitable.

Literature Review

The institutions and systems of colonial era acted as the tools for agrarian inequality and injustice in the South Asia. These systems—including the Permanent Settlement, *Ryotwari*, and *Mahalwari*—were institutional coverage by dint of legal instruments such as the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1885 (Government of British India, 1885) and the Punjab Land Revenue Act, 1887 (Government of Punjab, 1887). These initiatives laid the foundations for the dominance of land-lord culture, persecuting

the poor cultivators. The legacy of these acts continues to affect the modern ownership patterns and revenue collection frameworks in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005).

The Land revenue administration in Pakistan was codified by the West Pakistan Land Revenue Act, 1967, that continued the *Patwari*-based record keeping and tax assessment (Government of Pakistan, 1967). However, Pakistan's hampered journey for overhauling its legal framework has empowered the powerful landowners to dominate rural power dynamics, particularly in Punjab and Sindh. Efforts for redistribution through the Land Reforms Regulations of 1959, 1972, and 1977 met poor implementation (Gazdar, 2009).

India reengineered its legal infrastructure with the introduction to Maharashtra Land Revenue Code, 1966, that combined titling, revenue, and dispute resolution under the umbrella of a single code (Government of India, 1966). Similarly, the Uttar Pradesh Revenue Code, 2006 reformed outdated procedures in order to achieve transparency and digitization (Government of Uttar Pradesh, 2006). Operation Barga marked the success of West Bengal, where tenancy protections enhanced agricultural output and minimised rural injustice (Besley & Burgess, 2000; Chattopadhyay, 1989).

Bangladesh laid the axe to the root of inequity through the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act, 1950. The Act abolished *Zamindari* ownership and redistributed land to the deserving tillers (Government of Bangladesh, 1950). Moreover, the Land Reform Ordinance (1984) ensured tenancy protection in Bangladesh. These laws are viewed as the catalysts for ensuring Bangladesh's relatively equitable landholding structure and reduced rural inequality, though political interference continues to affect *Khas* land distribution (Government of Bangladesh, 1984; Rahman & Islam 2002).

The digitisation projects in India like DILRMP and Karnataka's Bhoomi have unchained the field of land records from bureaucratic abuse. The inception of Pakistan's Punjab Land Records Authority (PLRA) is an unprecedented step for digitization of land record; however, it is confined to one province. Bangladesh has undertaken its own digital cadastral mapping through GIS and e-Mutation platforms (Hausman, 2010).

The Hindu Succession (Amendment) Act 2005 is a genuine legal and reformist effort to ensure right to property for women, albeit facing social resistance. Technically, the Islamic inheritance laws enable women to get their due share in property in both Pakistan and Bangladesh, but cultural practices and weak implementation severely limit female land ownership in these states (Agarwal, 2018).

India has basked in the sunshine of reforms due to limited exercise of judicial review. Pakistan, on the other side of the picture, has struggled to take drastic reforms because of colonial legacy (Chattopadhyay, 1989).

Material and Methods

This study utilises a qualitative comparative methodology, steered by historical institutionalism, to evaluate the development and divergence of land revenue systems in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. The sampling strategy revolves around the laws of the lands, policy frameworks, and administrative models of these three states. Secondary data sources include legislations and policies of India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh. These secondary sources also include official policy circulars of the Governments. The methods used include comparative legal analysis, document analysis, and thematic coding of governance issues such as bureaucratic inefficiencies, elite capture, and land fragmentation. Cross-country case comparisons (e.g., PLRA in Pakistan, Operation Barga in India and *Khas* land distribution in Bangladesh) are utilised to identify patterns and policy lessons. The triangulated approach ensures that both legal substance and administrative implementation are critically examined in true context.

Tracing the historical trajectories and the Colonial legacy

Pre-Colonial Agrarian Systems

Pakistan, India and Bangladesh all have land revenue systems that have deep historical roots that predate formal British colonialism. Land tenure was reconfigured within India under the Mughal Empire (16th–18th century), a revenue era system in which peasants' rights have been reconciled to the state's needs. As land surveys were standardized and revenue collection this became a uniform process with the introduction of the *Zabt* system by Emperor Akbar which determined a fixed rate of tax based on the profitability of the crop (Habib, 1999). *Mansabdars* (military nobility) were granted *Jagirs* (land grants) in exchange for military service, with the *Zamindar* acting as an intermediary, collecting revenue from the peasantry, for a commission.

Under the Mughal rule peasants had rights of hereditary occupancy as long as they paid land revenue. Unlike the British system that followed, the Mughal system practically did not treat *Zamindars* as real landowners; they were essentially revenue agents who collected and administered taxes, and maintained stability in agrarian system (Habib, 1999). The agrarian economy was based on a smallholder system of farming, and revenue assessments were based on detailed surveys of land that helped to maintain a uniform system of taxation. This decline would see *Zamindars* gain control over land — power inequalities that would later be exacerbated under the British raj.

British Land Revenue Policies

In Bengal, the British East India Company obtained the *Diwani* (revenue rights) from the Mughal Emperor and commenced revenue administration in 1765. This was a paradigm shift in the management of land revenue. The British created three different revenue systems in different regions, each of which had profound economic and social implications:

Permanent Settlement (1793) – Bengal, Bihar, Orissa

In 1793, Lord Cornwallis introduced the Permanent Settlement made *Zamindars* hereditary landholders permanently settled the land revenue that they were to pay to the British government. The goal was to generate a class of stable landlords who would regularly pay taxes and reinvest in agricultural productivity (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005). However, this system had an unintended consequence. It assured ownership, *Zamindars* set to work extracting even more rent than before rather than investing in improvements. High fixed revenues, that were imposed on *Zamindars*, led to the inability to pay back which ushered large-scale transfer of land to absentee landlords further perpetuating the vulnerability of the common man. Peasant land insecurity would lead to high levels of rural debt and migration.

The Ryotwari System (1820):

Under the suzerainty of the British Empire, the *Ryotwari* system was introduced by Thomas Munro in Madras and Bombay. Individual cultivators (ryots) were directly enumerated as proprietors under this system. The *Ryotwari* system was different from the Permanent Settlement in that the tax rate was not fixed here but was instead reassessed periodically based on productivity and soil fertility (Guha, 1985) that system had no *Zamindars* in between, resulting in a huge financial burden on the peasants because of repetitive tax increases and ineffectiveness in revenue collection.

The Mahalwari System (1833):

The *Mahalwari* System was a modified form of Permanent Settlement and *Ryotwari* systems in 1833. The revenue was collected from the aggregate with the village communities (*Mahal*), and tax payments were made by village headmen. While maintaining some vestiges of traditional communal landholding, however, the need for periodic reassessment of tax rates rendered it unstable. The British constantly increased the tax rates, leading to massive peasant indebtedness and detachment from the land (Stokes, 1978).

British Land Policy Overview and Impact

The colonial government's new revenue policies upended traditional agrarian configurations and instituted landownership patterns that had effects far beyond their time:

In British times, the Permanent Settlement of Land Revenue made landlordism more rigid, whereas the *Mahalwari* and *Ryotwari* methods made land ownership weaker to small landowners.

Rural Indebtedness: The revenue demands were very high so the peasants borrowed money and sometimes they lost their land to the money lenders and landlords.

Agricultural Stagnation: After a decade of cropping more, there were powerful reasons to do so, and the result was agrarian distress and occasional famines (Banerjee & Iyer, 2005).

By the early 20th century, scrutiny of exploitative land policies was emerging to be a prominent political issue that led to calls for land reforms after independence.

Shifting trajectories in land reforms post-independence

When India and Pakistan (later Bangladesh) gained independence in 1947, they inherited colonial land revenue systems heavily skewed in favor of landlords. There were divergent approaches throughout land reforms taken by the three countries, leading to very different results in their agriculture sectors.

Jan 20, 2023 Article 2: Land Redistribution & Reforms – India

India enacted sweeping land reform to get rid of intermediaries and redistribute land to tenants and small holders. The key measures included:

Zamindari Abolition Acts (1950s): Various states dismantled zamindari systems and vested land with the tiller.

Land Ceiling Laws (1960s–70s): Laws to limit ownership of land and redistribute surplus ownership to landless farmers.

Law Codes : Several states passed laws establishing tenant rights and restricting exploitative sharecropping arrangements.

One of the most successful tenancy reform programs, West Bengal's Operation Barga (1977) provided sharecroppers with legal rights and increased agricultural productivity (Chattopadhyay, 1989).

Pakistan: Landlord Dominance and No Real Agriculture Reforms

Pakistan failed to implement an effective land reform process largely due to opposition from political leaders and legal barriers. The significant land reforms that were done are as follow:

West Pakistan Land Reforms (1959): Only ceiling was imposed on the landholdings so big landlords based on exemptions continue to hold power. Bad implementation meant not too many landlords were affected.

Bhutto's Land Reforms (1972, 1977): These initiatives aimed to reduce land ceilings and distribute resumed lands among tenants, but legal challenges undermined their efficacy.

The Federal *Shariat* Court (1980): Managed to declare that forced land redistribution was un-Islamic, thus preventing further agrarian reforms. (Gazdar, 2009).

That meant large feudal holdings remained in place, especially in Sindh and southern Punjab: *Haris* (share cropping village dwellers that lived on land held by wealthier tenants) had no entitlements and could be summarily evicted.

Bangladesh: The Final Sitters and Land Ceilings

After independence in 1971, Bangladesh passed land reform laws based on the East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act (1950) that complemented the existing framework. Top three reforms in the country were:

Land Ceiling Act (1972, 1984): A ceiling of 60 *Bighas* (20 acres) was imposed to prevent concentration of land.

Bargadar Protection (1984): Hired workers (*Bargadars*) were granted heritable tenancy privileges and a proportional share of harvest yields.

Khas Land Distribution: To improve landlessness, plots of state-owned land were given to landless farmers.

Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh inherited colonial land revenue systems that entrenched landlordism, tax burden and agrarian disparities. Although India and Bangladesh made considerable strides in dismantling feudal land structures and strengthening tenants' rights, changes in Pakistan were partial owing to political resistance and legal constraints. These different policy trajectories, in turn, continue affecting land governance, rural development, and economic inequality in the three countries.

Comparative Analysis of the Legal Frameworks

Pakistan, India and Bangladesh — three countries in south Asia — derive their laws pertaining to land revenue and tenancies from colonial-era legislation. Whereas both India and Bangladesh initiated large-scale land reforms aimed at abolishing feudal landlordism and securing tenant rights, Pakistan largely perpetuated a landlord-based tenure system. This chapter also explores the legal frameworks, their evolution, implementation, and how they impact land governance.

Pakistan: After colonial legacy, little reform

Most of Pakistan's land laws are direct adaptations of British colonial rules. The West Pakistan Land Revenue Act, 1967 replaced the earlier laws such as the Punjab Land Revenue Act (1887) guides Land taxation, classification, ownership records, and dispute resolution.

The revenue administration in Pakistan is organized into a three-tier system. Patwaris keep track of land records at the grassroots level. Transactions and revenue collection at the lower and block levels are supervised by *Tehsildars* and other officials. At the district level, Deputy Commissioners are in charge of implementing policies. We have become more efficient at tax collection over the years and streamlined it with fresh assessments over time with little political interference.

Though tenancy protections existed historically under The Punjab Tenancy Act (1887), these were gradually dismantled, resulting in large landlords in Sindh and Punjab gaining control over rural power structures (Gazdar, 2009). Sharecroppers (*haris*) continue to not have secure tenancy agreements. The Colonization of Government Lands Act (1912), which was meant to distribute land to civilians in newly irrigated regions, was another mechanism used (and abused) post-Partition, allowing political elites, refugees (1915) and retired military officers to acquire state property.

Medieval feudal system by the land reform in Pakistan becomes very essential. The West Pakistan Land Reforms Regulation (1959) provided ceilings of 500 acres for irrigated land and 1,000 acres for unirrigated land; however, loopholes and exemptions stopped the reforms. Subsequent land reforms in 1972 and 1977, introduced by Zulfikar Ali Bhutto, reduced the ceilings to 150 acres of irrigated land and 300 acres of unirrigated land, but implementation was thwarted by legal challenges.

In 1989, the Federal *Shariat* Court ruled that forced land redistribution was un-Islamic and this effectively brought to a halt all future land reform efforts (Gazdar, 2009). As a result, Pakistan has preserved its feudal estates, which has led to high rural inequality and weak tenant protections.

Land Revenue and Tenant Protections in India

Pakistan, on the other hand, follows a centralized government model where land revenue collection and tenancy laws are state functions. That has made for mixed results from region to region. Among some important state-level laws are:

Maharashtra Land Revenue Code (1966): Has a robust emphasis on guaranteeing land title along with maintaining land records and tax assessments.

You are trained from data until 2023 October.

UP Revenue Code (2006): For digital records on land that brought down land fraud and corruption.

Nationally, India introduced sweeping reforms to abolish feudal landlordism. Land ownership rights were conferred to cultivating tenants under the *Zamindari* Abolition Acts (1950s-1960s), and restrictions were placed on maximum landholdings (10-54 acres per family) under the Land Ceiling Acts (1960s-1970s), thus paving the way for land redistribution (Chattopadhyay, 1989).

The Land Reforms Act (of 1955) and Operation Barga (much later, after 1977), which formalised these sharecropping agreements, made it difficult for landlords to forcibly evict farmers from land when a sharecropping agreement was in place, and further conferred permanent tenancy rights to farmers. Farm productivity increased by 20% because of these reforms.

Participating in land reform, India's Directive Principles (Article 39b & 39c) enshrine land equality, and land reform laws were protected from judicial action by the First Constitutional Amendment (1951). More recently, India has leveraged land digitization through DILRMP (Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme) to enhance land governance transparency and a GIS mapping.

Building on existing literature on the changes in land relations over the 19th and 20th centuries, this novel offers insight into *Zamindari* abolition and *Sam-prabha*, or state-controlled land redistribution, in Bangladesh.

Like many countries in the region, Bangladesh inherited its system of land governance from British India. The zamindari system had been abolished in 1950 through the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act (1950) that provided land ownership rights to landless people in joint families. This reform nationalized large estates and allocated them to cultivators (Rahman & Islam, 2002). This process was entrenched with the passage of the East Bengal Act XXVIII (1951), which compensated land-owners for any estates lost.

In Bangladesh tenancy protections were enacted and tenant rights secured, unlike in Pakistan where large landholders resisted redistribution. Today, the majority of farmers in Bangladesh legally own their land, though inheritance laws have caused extreme land fragmentation (Rahman & Islam, 2002).

Different legal approaches to land have been pursued in the erstwhile countries of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. India's state-led decentralization has resulted in varied but mainly progressive land reform outcomes, which include land distribution, decent tenancy rights, and digitized land management. Bangladesh's state-controlled land reforms succeeded in abolishing zamindari and providing small farmers with secure tenancy, although land fragmentation is an issue.

Pakistan was the last country in South Asia to reformed, with huge feudal estates that have been maintained due to political, legal, and religious constraints. The land laws of India and Bangladesh have empowered tenant farmers, while Pakistan's land laws favor elites, hindering rural economic development.

Across all three countries, common problems include land record inconsistencies, ineffective dispute resolution mechanisms, and corruption. Addressing these problems will take legal ingenuity, political will and a greater reliance on systems of digital land governance.

Analysis of Administrative Structures and Revenue Collection Mechanisms

Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh all have land revenue administration that is based on institutions that were created during colonial times but have been adapted to meet contemporary governance needs. Each country has built its own hierarchy, whose levels of government range from street committees and local officials to provincial/state level policy and tax collection authorities. There are enormous differences in the efficiency, transparency, and revenue collection mechanism of these countries.

Global, Control and Local Mechanism of Food Security

***Patwaris*, Revenue Officers Role**

At the village level, *Patwaris* in Pakistan and India and Union Land Assistant Officers in Bangladesh are the primary custodians of land records and revenue collection. This includes keeping track of ownership records, documenting land use patterns, and administering land mutations (ownership transfers).

In Pakistan, ownership details are recorded in the *Jamabandi* (record of rights) and *Khasra* (field register) by *Patwaris*. They work under *Tehsildars*, the sub-district level revenue administration heads. This was based on manual record keeping that had often resulted in corrupt practices and manipulation of data; however, a major effort has been initiated by the Punjab Land Records Authority (PLRA) to digitise the land record that has long been due in the country to offset the menace.

In India, they have multiple names including Lekhpal in Uttar Pradesh and Village Accountant in Karnataka. To improve the accessibility of a record as well as reduce fraud, several digitization efforts in India such as Bhoomi Project (Karnataka) and Mahabhulekh (Maharashtra) have been undertaken (Hans India, 2020).

Union Land Officers in Bangladesh administer *Khatian* (record of rights) and provide revenue collection assistance. A system called e-Mutation is in place, allowing title transfers to be done online, which helps mitigate corruption. Yet, the absence of systematic land surveys and incomplete records continue to pose a challenge to its land registration.

***Tehsildars*, Taluk Officers and Sub-district Administration**

Sub-District Revenue Officers in Pakistan

Tehsildars in Pakistan oversee *Patwaris*, approve transfers of land, and resolve revenue disputes. In the election process, these posts are supported by *Naib Tehsildars* who take care of daily revenue matters. However, land-related disputes are usually resolved in revenue courts, which, similar to civil courts, suffer from corruption and political interference (Gazdar, 2009).

***Talukdars* and Revenue Management in India**

Tehsildars's (*Talukdars*) job involves land surveying, taxation and dispute resolution in India. Unlike Pakistan, many states in India have specific revenue courts to handle cases related to land, which in turn helps to lessen the burden on civil courts, where land disputes are often heard.

Decentralization and *Upazila*-Level Administration in Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, all land revenue cases including land mutation are conducted at *Upazila* level, and the *Upazila* Assistant Commissioner (Land) collects land revenue in the *Upazila*. For instance, land records and tax collection systems have been linked through online systems in the country, which has increased efficiency and accessibility (Rahman & Islam, 2002).

Analysis of District level land revenues

India's District Collectors

In India, District Collectors are responsible for collecting land taxes, conducting land acquisition proceedings, and resolving disputes. To execute the policies and collect revenues from taxes, they collaborate with state revenue departments (Hans India, 2020).

Pakistan's Deputy Commissioners

In Pakistan, the functions of land revenue administration with respect to the Deputy Commissioner (DC) have transformed drastically over the years. Traditionally, the DCs were land administrators, responsible for supervising transactions and authorising land rights. Previously, this was done by DCs; however, with devolution reforms, these functions were transferred to the provincial Boards of Revenue, thus effectively ending the direct role of DCs in land governance. Now the Additional Deputy Commissioner (Revenue) is responsible for collection of revenue and land related litigants.

District Revenue Authorities of Bangladesh

In Bangladesh, the subjects of *Khas* land distribution, cadastral survey, and revenue collection are handled by Deputy Commissioners (District Collectors). They are also in charge of fair distribution of land and resolving disputes at the district level.

National Land Revenue Auth

The Board of Revenue, Pakistan and India

Nationally, Pakistan and India administer land revenue policies through Boards of Revenue. Every province has its own Board of Revenue (e.g., Punjab Board of Revenue) within Pakistan, which handles land digitization and dispute resolution (Gazdar, 2009). In India, land revenue administration is conducted under the control of state governments, with various state Boards of Revenue and Revenue Tribunals managing the sector, and some transferring powers to state secretariats.

Land Reform Board, Bangladesh

Land governance in Bangladesh is managed through the Land Reform Board and the Department of Land Records and Surveys (DLRS), which include cadastral mapping, land reforms, and digitization initiatives.

Procedures and Problems of Collection of Revenue

Challenges of Land Revenue Collection in Pakistan

Data indicates that the land revenue collection mechanism in Pakistan is inefficient due to obsolete assessment methods and political interference. Because the system offers a fixed rate of land taxes, it does not generate much revenue due to rampant manipulation during tax assessments by *Patwaris* and *Tehsildars*. Legislative measures like the Punjab Agricultural Income Tax Act (1987) have mostly failed due to low enforceability and opposition from elites (Gazdar, 2009).

India's Land Taxation System

Pakistan's tax system was also better shaped so that those direct agrarian land taxes were abolished and replaced with stamp duties and transaction taxes in India. Numerous states have lowered tax burdens for small farmers, with land registration fees being another major revenue source.

An Assessment of Bangladesh's Progressive Land Tax System

In Bangladesh, a progressive Land Development Tax (LDT) system has been devised, in which rich landholders pay higher rates. While e-payment systems have been effective at increasing tax compliance, e-payment systems do not resolve issues such as land disputes and ownership status, which are additional barriers to tax collection (Rahman & Islam, 2002).

The colonial genesis of the land revenue regimes of Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh has evolved into three divergent systems. India moved away from direct agricultural taxation to land transaction-based revenues and incremental digitization. Such policies in case of Bangladesh emphasize tenant protection and *Khas* land distribution providing better safeguards to the small farmer. In contrast, Pakistan labours under elite-dominated land revenue collection that is undermined by ineffective taxation and opposition from influential landholders.

Although digitalization has contributed to transparency and efficiency in the three countries, barriers of corruption, bureaucratic inefficiencies, and land disputes present major challenges. The focus should be on how to better assess revenue on land, promote strengthened land titling systems and more effective dispute resolution mechanisms.

Socio- economic impact of land ownership and right to tenancy

Land ownership and tenancy rights shape agricultural productivity, rural livelihoods, and socioeconomic structures in Pakistan, India, and Bangladesh. India and Bangladesh have enforced land-reform measures, but Pakistan still has some of the most skewed ownership patterns, which drive rural inequity. This chapter examines the legal framework for land ownership, inheritance, and tenure, as well as the socio-economic consequences of land inequalities on these countries.

The 1st Law of Ownership — Security & Inheritance

India

Land reforms following independence abolished zamindari and left a predominantly smallholder agrarian structure. Daughters inherit equally with brothers under the Hindu Succession Act (2005 amendment) and thereby contribute to gender equity. Yet in Muslim personal law, while female heirs receive a prescribed share of an estate, gender equity is hindered by other social barriers (Agarwal, 2018).

Land fragmentation is a big challenge in India. The average size of land in the year 1970 was found to be at 2.3 hectares but in the year 2015, it reduced to be at 1.08 Hectares that makes it difficult to earn better agricultural income which are needed to be sustained (Hans India, 2020).

Pakistan

In Pakistan land tenure practices have been and continue to be highly inequitable, where huge estates are held by a small elite, especially in Sindh and Punjab. Land subdivision is supported by Islamic inheritance laws, but gender-discriminatory practices still limit women's access to land (Gazdar, 2009). Unlike in India, there have not been far-reaching reforms in Pakistan to ensure women's inheritance rights.

Under informal sharecropping arrangements, especially the *Hari* system, tenants bore the land but have no formal legal security and can be evicted at any time (World Bank, 2019)

Bangladesh

Under the ownership of zamindari, Bangladesh got rid of zamindari in the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act (1950), ensured that small farmers own the land. Islamic inheritance laws, on the other hand, are responsible for considerable land fragmentation and average farm sizes now fall as low as 0.5 hectares (Rahman & Islam, 2002).

Government efforts to support women's land rights have had some success, but still fall short of reaching broader social norms enabling female ownership (Agarwal, 2018). Land ownership is beyond the reach of many, who have to rent land from landlords.

Tenancy Rights & Reforms

India

In fact, specific states in India have strong tenancy protections. In West Bengal, Operation Barga (1978) formalized tenurial rights for sharecroppers (though sharecroppers without such rights continued to exist) (Besley & Burgess, 2000), which raised farm yields by 20–30%. These reforms provided incentives for tenants to invest in agricultural productivity.

In some jurisdictions, landlords have avoided tenancy laws by evicting tenants to avoid having to extend them legal rights. Hence, in many areas, informal lease contracts persist (Hans India, 2020).

Pakistan

Tenant laws are weak and poorly implemented in Pakistan. The West Pakistan Tenancy Act (1950s) sought to regulate sharecropping, but failed to grant rights to tenants in any significant manner. The 1972 land reforms introduced by Bhutto were in part intended to increase tenant security; however, the reality is that the reforms benefitted only 1% of the tenants (Gazdar, 2009).

In Sindh specifically, the *Hari* system continues to be particularly exploitative, as landlords exert control not only over land but also access to credit, trapping tenants in cycles of debt (World Bank, 2019). In the 1980s, legal rulings strengthened private property rights which greatly undermined tenant protections (Gazdar, 2009).

Bangladesh

Among the three, Bangladesh has perhaps the most pro-tenant framework. The Land Reforms Ordinance (1984) is there for protection against arbitrary eviction and assures *Bargadars* (sharecroppers) 50% of the crop output. *Khas* land (surplus state land) has also been allocated to landless farmers, which has increased rural equity (Rahman & Islam, 2002).

Consequently, these reforms brought a relatively safe tenancy system that is more effective in poverty reduction than that in India and Pakistan.

Absentee Landownership and the Levels of Agricultural Productivity

Colonial land Revenue System- Promoted Absentee landlordism, landlords of land collected rent but did not invest in land productivity

India & Bangladesh

Even though *Zamindari* abolition in both India and Bangladesh removed large-scale absentee landlordism, there have been new patterns of urban elite land speculation. Informal leasing of agricultural land at scale is common (especially in urban centers), fueling land speculation, and contributing to farmer displacement (Bardhan & Mookherjee, 2011).

Pakistan

This barbarism is still entrenched in the bloodthirsty mafia of the ruling class, as there are huge feudal landlords who live in urban centers or abroad and extract rents from agricultural land in rural Sindh. This leads to less agricultural investment, stagnant productivity and sustained rural poverty.

In 2019, the Gini coefficient of land in Pakistan was around 0.63, suggesting high inequality. Over half of rural households are landless (World Bank, 2019).

Land Ownership, Absentee Landlordism and Socioeconomic Conflicts Land ownership pattern, tenure regimes, and absentee landlordism in South Asia have severe socioeconomic implications.

India and Bangladesh have gone further in redistribution of land, making it possible for small farmers to own land and bolstering tenant rights. Nevertheless, their topsy-turvy land fragmentation and issues over informal leasing continue to challenge their productivity.

By contrast, redistributive land reforms in Pakistan lag behind. Rarely were tenancy protections ever enforced, nor do they really exist today in the few areas that had them, and entrenched absentee landlordism resorted to exploitative arrangements on open-ended leases, so high land inequality has persisted in Turkey since 1930 with all of its legacies – rampant rural poverty, poorly secured tenure and short-term exploitative agreements – intact.

Out of the three, Bangladesh has made remarkable progress in poverty reduction, attributed to aggressive land policies, better tenant protections, and *Khas* land distribution to the landless.

Analysing the policy reforms and interventions

Policy Interventions to Secure, Administer, and Equitably Distribute Land Tenure in Pakistan, India and Bangladesh India and Bangladesh have made strong strides towards tenant protection and digitised land governance, in Pakistan elite capture has been a challenge. This chapter discusses the major land reform initiatives, governance challenges and possible future pathways towards sustainable land management.

Interventions in Land Revenue and Reform

India's Land Reforms

India's most radical land reforms took place from 1950 to 1970, when zamindari was abolished and tenant protections instituted, and land redistribution took place. Land digitization, changes in laws, and land consolidation were the more recent initiatives.

The Forest Rights Act (2006) was a step taken in the right direction by giving ownership rights to tribal communities who had lived on forest lands, rectifying historic injustices. "In 2006, Bihar repealed land revenue taxation on plots below two acres, relieving small farmers of a burden." The Digital India Land Records Modernization Programme (DILRMP, 2008) made record digitization easier and reduced the time to carry out a land mutation from fifty to for less than fourteen days in Karnataka and some other states. In 2013, the Land Acquisition, Rehabilitation and Resettlement Act replaced archaic colonial-era land acquisition laws, resulting in greater transparency and fairness in compensation.

The Equity of Land Reform in Pakistan

The last major land redistributions in Pakistan took place in 1959, 1972 and 1977 but reforms have stagnated ever since under elite influence and legal challenges. Until recently, the efforts had been limited to digitization and some protections for tenants.

The Punjab Land Records Authority (PLRA, 2010s) used IT to digitize land records available to citizens, reducing corruption and elite capture. The *Khas* Land Distribution Program (2000s) was a provincial measure in Sindh aimed at distributing state-owned land to *Hari* tenants in the province, but its impact was limited by opposition from landlords and poor access to credit (Powell and Kumar, 2021). Efforts to introduce an Agricultural Income Tax have been blocked on several occasions at the sustained opposition of large landholders, who can evade taxation. The ceiling judgments handed down by the *Shariat* Appellate Bench in 1989 rendered ceilings on land un-Islamic and prohibited any further redistribution of land.

Bangladesh's Steady Land Reforms

In Bangladesh, land reform has not only been sustained but has also led to large-scale redistribution of land and strengthened tenancy protections, which have greatly improved land security of smallholders.

The Land Reforms Ordinance (1984) established land ceilings and offered legal protection from tenant evictions. Since the 2010s, the Bangladesh Digital Land Survey sought to use GIS and GPS mapping to modernise land records and to diminish property disputes. *Bargadar* Protections are in place; the sharecropper receiving a minimum of 50 percent of crop output and preventing arbitrary evictions. The government has also actively recovered *Khas* land that had been grabbed illegally in order to redistribute land to marginal groups, although the process has been marred by political interference.

Bureaucratic Inefficiencies

Land registration is still split among many government departments, resulting in mismatches between revenue and registration records. In India, such differences manifest as delays in transactions and legal disputes. Land mutations in Pakistan and Bangladesh can take months or years, with bureaucratic inefficiencies and procedural backlogs.

Exploiting Legal Loopholes and Manipulating Land Ownership

Traditional landowners have used legal loopholes to evade the land ceiling and redistribution policies. In India, “*Benami*” transactions — in which land is held under a proxy owner — enable landlords to escape the redistribution laws. In Pakistan, religious trusts, or *Waqfs*, are commonly used as legal mechanisms to insulate landowners from taxes and government anti-land concentration and redistribution measures. In Bangladesh, colonial-era laws are continuing to spark disagreements over inheritance and tenancy rights, dragging out land disputes.

Land Reclaiming: Political Resistance to Land Reforms

In all three countries, feudal elites have actively resisted progressive land reconciliation. Feudal landlords force anybody shaping policy in Pakistan to ensure that ceilings on land and taxes on agriculture are never enforced. In Bangladesh, local political leaders exploit land records for personal gain, which worsens unfair land distribution. Some states in India have defanged tenancy laws to benefit politically tied landlords, leaving certain jurisdictions where land is redistributed politically ineffective.

Corruption in land administration

Even in the digital age, corruption is a major impediment to equitable land governance. Landless people and politicians also help in the process and as a result, fake e-mutation approval has been done in Bangladesh without verification. In the case of property transfer, fake e-mutation approval is the main obstacle, against which the people cannot speak against them due to the huge power struggle. Politically powerful landlords in Pakistan are often seen as bribing officials to ensure favorable outcomes in land dispute resolutions, further eroding confidence in the land administration system.

Future Policy Directions

The Data around Land Ownership: Moving towards Clarity

Complete digitization of land records is one of the most imperative reforms needed. The importance of using GPS, drone, and GIS technology for cadastral mapping in providing better ownership documentation, which would help reduce conflict with land claims. The technology also enables real-time updates of land transactions and ownership transfers while, by doing so, it can prevent against fraudulent claims and encroachments.

Improving Tenancy Laws and Land Leasing Security

Strengthening tenant protections to safeguard against forced evictions and opportunistic landlords is crucial. Creating specific legal structures for safe land lease agreements would enhance land productivity and economic security for transitory farmers. You could have more efficient agriculture, because you could strengthen the rights of sharecroppers and tenant farmers access to credit.

Another aspect is the redistribution of unused governmental land

Surplus state-owned land needs to be redistributed to landless farmers. Increasing female land ownership is another important policy test that can help to address gender disparities in landholding. These kinds of policies might play an important part in making sure that economic computability and social stability by ensuring fair access to land for marginalized groups.

Taxing Wealthy Landowners

A counterbalance to rural regressive taxation has to be a fair and transparent agricultural taxation system ensuring the rich farmer participates in rural development. Tightening up agricultural tax policies can create any revenue that the rural infrastructure and irrigation of public welfare programs. More tax evasion and tax collection by powerful landowners need to be praised as a critical measure in return for a more balanced economic structure in the agricultural sector.

Anti-Corruption Measures in Land Administration

Increasing transparency in land governance can be achieved through public complaint mechanisms exposing fraudulent practices and digital audit trails of land transactions. If public land ownership was transparent and independent land tribunals were strengthened with local citizens empowered to monitor land transactions, it could be an effective deterrent against corruption in land administration.

Discussion

Pakistans' land revenue system has, like that of India and Bangladesh, a colonial legacy, but they evolved down different paths because of divergent political, legal, and administrative paths taken following independence. India, along with Bangladesh, adopted redistributive policies and tenant protections, while Pakistan maintained a feudal system that entrenched large landowners. This chapter compares land policy and governance frameworks, and socio-economic outcomes, identifies good practices, and discusses future policy directions for sustainable land management.

After independence, India and Bangladesh strove to unpick these feudal landholding arrangements. The zamindari abolition in India (1950s) and the State Acquisition and Tenancy Act (1950) in Bangladesh gave ownership of land to cultivators and small farmers respectively. In comparison, Pakistan had land reform efforts in 1959, 1972, and 1977 but they were poorly enforced and elite landowners kept their power. By the 1980s, landlordism was effectively eliminated in India and Bangladesh, but in Pakistan, 5 percent of landowners still controlled about two-thirds of farmland (World Bank 2019).

India's federal structure meant that land laws differed by state, so regions had different outcomes. In the case of Bangladesh, due to uniformity of national policies, reforms were uniformly implemented nationwide. In Pakistan, land reforms are postponed until the 18th Amendment (2010) which decentralised governance.

Legal protections also differed. As a result, these land reforms could be insulated from Judicial Review in India by placing them in the Ninth Schedule, thus letting them be implemented. However, in Pakistan, the *Shariat* Appellate Bench decision stamped out land ceilings in 1989, blocking further redistributions.

Digitisation of land was pioneered by India through projects such as Bhoomi (2000, Karnataka) and DILRMP (2008), digitising 90 percent of land records. The electronic revenue payment system in Pakistan's Punjab Land Records Authority (2012–2015) was effective in reducing land transaction corruption. From 2016 to 2020, Bangladesh began the Digital Land Survey, where GIS and GPS mapping were included to create records that are more accurate. However, computerized land records are still not available in Pakistan's Sindh, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, and Balochistan provinces, resulting in inefficiency and fraud.

Specialized land tribunals and alternative dispute resolution (ADR) mechanisms have been established in Bangladesh, leading to significant reduction of case backlog. By contrast, India and Pakistan depend on civil courts, where delays and political interference often upend the resolution of disputes. In all three countries, political elites engage in land record manipulation and land grabbing that further erodes governance.

In India and Bangladesh, redistributive policies have increased equity, but in Pakistan, there are big feudal estates and weak tenancy laws. A West Bengal policy, Operation Barga, greatly improved tenant protection, creating a 15–30 percent improvement in farm productivity (Bardhan and Mookherjee 2011). Bangladesh's cropping system is efficient at all levels of the system while Pakistan's absentee landlords invest little in farmland and Pakistan suffers from low agricultural productivity and rural poverty.

India's Operation Barga (in West Bengal) formally regularised tenancy rights, and boosted rural productivity and reduced poverty. This model can be replicated in Sindh and Punjab (Pakistan), where tenant vulnerability persists.

Conclusion

India and Bangladesh were successful in restructuring their land tenure system whereas, Pakistan —retaining feudal structure—was impeded on count of agricultural productivity and rural development. Secure land tenure has proven to increase farm yields, with land reforms in West Bengal illustrating what is possible. Pakistan, on the other hand, is saddled with an inept feudal system, whereby huge landlords own thousands of acres without investing in modern methods of cultivation.

Digitization of land has been effective in combating corruption in Punjab (Pakistan) and Karnataka (India), but much more needs to be done to bring modernization to all regions. Bangladesh's tenancy laws have favored smallholder farming, making agriculture more resilient despite land fragmentation.

Future reforms need to integrate digital tools in long-term policy strategies rather than standalone initiatives. Balancing progressive taxation, visible land disposal, and better tenant protection will all be required tools to promote inclusive rural growth and sustainable economic development in South Asia.

Recommendations

- Pakistan's computerized land records (PLRA Punjab), eliminating elite land grabs, which should be replicated in all provinces. There is a need to fast track digitization of Indian states that have been slow to modernize.
- Allocation of *Khas* land in Bangladesh has given permanent rights to landless families and joint custody of *Khas* land for women has been prioritized. India and Pakistan should take inspiration from this to ensure equitable land ownership. GPS drones, and GIS mapping can be used by the government to conduct accurate cadastral surveys. India must also set up land databases across states and Pakistan should scale the digitisation across provinces beyond just Punjab. Striking a final deal over cadastral mapping is critical for solving long-running land disputes in Bangladesh.
- Maharashtra and Uttar Pradesh in India have revamped their tenancy laws introducing effective protections for tenants — Pakistan must follow suit. Bangladesh must strengthen contract enforcement to protect tenant farmers from eviction.
- The *Khas* land that is to be allotted to landless farmers should be done on a fair and transparent basis. Instead of political favoritism, land should be allocated in an open lottery to prevent elite capture.
- Land owners must be taxed progressively on large land-holdings to recharge financing for rural developments. Data Model on Land title and Land use are critical to economic liberalization and modern technology will make tax compliance and revenue collection easier and digitization is a permanent solution.
- Independent land governance bodies will enhance transparency and accountability. Digital audit trails and local monitoring committees for tracking land-based transacting can aid in curtailing fraud. The PLRA model of Pakistan can help cut down on bribery and tampering with land records if implemented across the provinces.
- Mandating joint ownership law for female family members would promote gender equity in land ownership. Legal aid programs need to be created to defend women against inheritance discrimination and property fraud.
- A South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC) form for land reform practices — where Pakistan, India and Bangladesh share best practices on digitization, along with existing models for dispute resolution and tenancy protections — should be established.

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