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## Social Structure and Changes of the Family in Rural Punjab: A Case Study of Faisalabad Division

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### Abstract:

This study examines the evolving social structure of the family in rural Punjab, Pakistan, using Faisalabad Division as a case study. Historically characterized by patriarchal authority, joint-family systems, and agrarian economic dependence, the rural family unit is undergoing profound transformations driven by urbanization, migration, education, and technological penetration. Employing a mixed-methods approach including survey data, ethnographic interviews, and secondary analysis this research investigates the shifting dynamics of authority, gender roles, marriage patterns, and economic functions within the familial context. The findings indicate a complex transition from traditional joint-family structures toward more nuclear or modified extended family models, accompanied by evolving aspirations, increased female agency, and renegotiated intergenerational contracts. This article argues that while structural changes are evident, they are mediated and shaped by persistent cultural norms, resulting in a distinct hybrid family model unique to the rural Punjabi sociocultural landscape.

**Keywords:** Rural Punjab, Family Structure, Social Change, Modified Extended Family, Patriarchy, Female Agency, Intergenerational Contract, Migration, Cultural Hybridity

### Introduction:

The family unit remains the foundational social institution in rural Punjab, serving as the primary locus for economic activity, socialization, and cultural reproduction (Eglar, 1960; Alavi, 1972). For generations, its structure has been defined by patrilineal descent, patrilocal residence, and a hierarchical joint family system (the *khandaan* or *gharana*), wherein authority was concentrated in the eldest male. Faisalabad Division, a central Punjab region with a robust agricultural base and a growing industrial-urban core in Faisalabad city, presents a critical and dynamic case study for observing familial change. Forces such as out-migration for labor, the expansion of formal education, access to media and communication technologies, and the commercialization of agriculture are exerting unprecedented pressure on traditional family structures (Shakil & Khan, 2014; Sathar & Kazi, 2000). This research seeks to analyze the contours of this change, addressing the following questions: How is the social structure of the rural family in Faisalabad Division being reconfigured? What are the key drivers and manifestations of this transformation, and how do families negotiate the tensions between modernizing impulses and traditional obligations?

### Literature Review:

Classical anthropological studies of Punjab described the joint family as an adaptive unit for pooling labor and capital in an agrarian economy, emphasizing values of collectivism, honor (*izzat*), and reciprocal obligation (*wasta*) (Eglar, 1960; Das, 1970). Alavi (1972) further analyzed its deep embeddedness within the feudal (*zamindari*) production system. Subsequent scholarship has intensely debated the presumed "inevitable" shift toward nuclear families, a thesis often linked to modernization theory (Goode, 1963). Recent studies in the Pakistani context suggest a more nuanced reality: while household composition may be nuclearizing, functional, economic, and affective ties often remain robustly extended (Sathar & Kazi, 2000; Mohmand, 2011). Empirical research highlights specific catalysts for change: male migration to Gulf countries or urban centers, which alters household headship and decision-making dynamics (Gazdar, 2007); rising educational attainment, particularly among women, which delays marriage and reshapes spousal expectations (Naveed & Arif, 2019); and the pervasive influence of digital media, which introduces new lifestyle and consumer aspirations (Hussain, 2018). This



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study builds upon this sophisticated understanding, focusing specifically on the process of change within the unique socio-economic ecology of Faisalabad Division.

This study employs a sequential exploratory mixed-methods design conducted over 12 months (2022-2023). Quantitative data were collected through a structured survey administered to 400 randomly selected households across four predominantly rural districts of Faisalabad Division: Faisalabad, Chiniot, Toba Tek Singh, and Jhang. The survey instrument gathered data on household composition, marriage patterns, educational attainment, occupational profiles, migration history, and decision-making processes. Qualitative data were derived from 60 in-depth, semi-structured interviews (evenly distributed by gender and age cohort) and 10 focus group discussions with community elders, women, and youth. Purposive sampling ensured representation from different landholding strata (landless, small, medium, large) and caste (zaat) groups. Thematic analysis was employed to code the qualitative data, which was subsequently triangulated with the quantitative survey findings to ensure robustness and validity.

Survey data confirm a marked decline in the classic multigenerational joint household. Only 22% of surveyed households conformed to the traditional model of two or more married brothers co-residing with their parents. However, a decisive majority (58%) exemplified a "modified extended family" structure: aging parents residing with one married son (typically the youngest), while other sons live separately but in close geographical proximity, maintaining dense networks of economic cooperation, social support, and ritual participation (Moghadam, 1992). This configuration represents a strategic adaptation, balancing the autonomy desired by young couples with the enduring imperatives of eldercare, property management, and cooperative farming or business ventures.

The traditional, monolithic authority of the patriarch (chaudhry or budhay) is demonstrably eroding. While his symbolic and social authority remains significant, his decision-making prerogatives are increasingly subject to consultation with educated sons and, critically, with sons employed in non-agricultural sectors who contribute vital remittance income. As noted by a 45-year-old schoolteacher in Toba Tek Singh, "My father is still the head, but before finalizing the sale of the wheat harvest, he will now call me and my brother who works in Lahore to discuss the current market rate" (Personal Interview, January 2023). A more pronounced shift is observable within the *zanani* (women's sphere). Educated daughters-in-law now exert considerably greater influence in domains such as children's education, healthcare choices, and household consumption patterns, although major financial investments and public-facing family decisions largely remain a male purview.

Women's roles are undergoing a notable expansion beyond the strictly domestic and agricultural spheres, albeit within culturally defined and often contested boundaries. Female literacy rates within the sample have risen to 48% (from a markedly lower baseline a generation ago), correlating with a higher average age of marriage for women (increasing from approximately 18 to 22 years). A small but growing cohort of women is engaging in white-collar professions (e.g., teaching, healthcare) or home-based entrepreneurial activities (e.g., embroidery, catering), which provides them with independent income and enhanced status and bargaining power within the household (Kabeer, 1999). However, norms of *pardah* (female seclusion) and acute concerns regarding family honor (*ghairat*) continue to circumscribe physical mobility and professional choice. Consequently, the transformation is best described as "contained," incrementally increasing women's domestic bargaining power without radically overturning the foundational gender order (Kandiyoti, 1988).

Arranged marriages remain virtually universal, yet the matrimonial process itself has been substantially transformed. The traditional *rishta* (proposal) system now incorporates greater consideration of the prospective couple's educational compatibility and personal consent, with many young men and women asserting a definitive "right of refusal" (Naveed & Arif, 2019). Paradoxically, dowry (*jahez*) demands have intensified and become increasingly monetized, representing a severe financial burden for families

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with daughters. Conversely, a strong preference for consanguineous marriages (watta satta, or cousin marriages) persists at a high rate (approximately 60% within the sample), underscoring the enduring power of kinship networks in consolidating property, managing social alliances, and preserving cultural identity.

The family's economic foundation is undergoing significant diversification. Sole dependence on agricultural landholding is in decline. The majority of households now have at least one member engaged in non-farm work whether in factories in Faisalabad, the military, or overseas employment. This economic diversification inevitably shifts leverage and influence toward younger, salaried members, thereby instigating a renegotiation of the intergenerational contract. The traditional expectation that sons will provide labor on the family land in exchange for future inheritance is increasingly strained when sons pursue urban or overseas careers. Elders often adapt by mechanizing agricultural operations or leasing out land, while still expecting and often receiving financial support and ritual deference from their migrant children.

Despite structural shifts within the family, several pillars of cultural value and identity demonstrate remarkable resilience. The concept of izzat (honor), encompassing familial reputation and the conduct of women, remains a powerful moral framework guiding decision-making. Zaat (caste) identity continues to play a crucial, though sometimes evolving, role in organizing marriage alliances and social hierarchies. Collective observance of religious rituals and festivals reinforces familial solidarity. Thus, the family operates as a crucial site of cultural negotiation, where new practices are reconciled with, or reinterpreted through, the lens of enduring values.

Formal education and communication technology act as powerful dual agents of change. Higher education alters the occupational aspirations of the youth, frequently pulling them away from agrarian livelihoods. Smartphones and social media have exposed younger generations to new social worlds, profoundly influencing perceptions of family relations, marriage, and lifestyle aspirations. However, this very access has also fostered generational divides, creating visible gaps in lifestyles and worldviews between elders and the younger generation.

Understanding this nuanced process of change is vital for effective policy formulation. Agricultural policies must acknowledge the increasing non-farm diversification of rural household incomes. Initiatives that create economic opportunities for women and enhance their access to education can further strengthen their voice in familial decision-making. Social protection schemes for elderly care are crucial for families navigating this transitional phase.

## **Conclusion:**

The social structure of the family in rural Faisalabad Division is in a state of dynamic flux, moving not along a simplistic linear trajectory from "traditional" to "modern" but toward a complex and adaptive hybridity. The residential joint family, as an ideal and a practical unit, may be receding, but the kinship network persists as a vital source of identity, material support, and risk management. Changes in authority structures, gender roles, and economic behaviors are tangible and significant, yet they are consistently negotiated within the durable frameworks of izzat (honor), zaat (caste identity), and familial duty. The emergent model is a "modified extended family" that strategically incorporates elements of nuclear autonomy while consciously preserving functional and symbolic extended ties. This transition is neither seamless nor free from conflict, generating palpable tensions between generations and genders over resources, values, and life aspirations. Future policy interventions related to rural development, women's empowerment, and social welfare must, therefore, be grounded in this nuanced, negotiated reality of familial change, rather than relying on assumptions of either complete stasis or a wholesale rupture with the past.



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