

## Local Government, Rural Development and Peoples' Participation in Bangladesh

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Peoples' participation<sup>1</sup> is both a goal and a condition for the successful operation of both a local government system and rural development programme. In this perspective an attempt will be made here in this paper to examine the local government systems and rural development programmes that have been practised in Bangladesh.

The local government system has an age old tradition in our country whose origin can be traced in the introduction of *Chawkidary Panchayat* Act in 1873. The Act divided the countryside into 'unions' comprising about ten or twelve square miles each and they would embrace a number of villages within their fold. Each of these unions was placed under a committee known as *Panchayat* committee consisting of five members. The committee was made responsible to maintain peace in the locality and was empowered to collect taxes to raise fund for the payment to the village police or *Chowkidar*. It would, perhaps, not be out of place to recall here that the British administration

in Bengal was primarily designed to collect revenue and maintain law and order. The *Zamindars* created under the Permanent Settlement Act of 1793 were given the responsibility for both tasks. But by the middle of 19th century they ceased to take interest in the maintenance of law and order. This resulted in the enactment of the *Chowkidari Panchayat* Act of 1870.

The *Panchayat* committee was not an elected body and nomination by the government was the practice.<sup>2</sup> Only the influential persons of the locality could manage to get the nomination and in the process of nomination the *Zamindar* used to play the main role since it were they who were in touch with government as revenue collector as well as loyal persons.<sup>3</sup> Given the nature of their formation the *Panchayat* committees led only a formal existence and were popularly regarded not as the representatives of the village folk, but as servants of the 'sarkar', the government.<sup>4</sup> Moreover, the five-member *panchayat* committee could ensure only five villages, at best, from a group of nearly one hundred or so to represent in the committee. Thus nearly 95% of the village felt deprived so far as the *panchayat* affairs were concerned. The system, therefore, soon became a subject of criticism owing to such factors as nominative character of the *panchayat* committee, involuntary acceptance of the committee membership-no acceptance leading to fine or punishment; assignment of responsibility without authority, dismissal from membership by the district magistrate without assigning any cause and also the collection of *chawkidary* taxes without any corresponding service. The unpopularity of the

Act invited further reform in the system of local administration.

The Act followed was known as the Local Self-Government Act of 1885 which came as an outcome of amendments and recommendations made by the then Viceroy, Lord Ripon who regarded the reform and rejuvenation of local self-government as the greatest achievement of his Viceroyalty.<sup>5</sup> He was a liberal, and believed that if local government was to have any vitality, then it should evolve out of local circumstances; that if that had to be created artificially, at least that should be the planned in detail by local administrators, and not be imposed ready-made by the central government.<sup>6</sup> Once he wrote, "... I do not think India is yet fit for a low suffrage; I should, therefore, generally speaking, keep it moderately high at present. What I want, to secure by the extension of local self-government is not a representation of the people of a European democratic type, but the gradual training of the best, most intelligent, and most influential men in the community to take an interest and an active part in the management of their local affairs... If the Boards are to be of any use for the purpose of training the natives to manage their own affairs, they must not be overshadowed by the constant presence of the *Burra Shahib*...; they must be left gradually more and more to run along, though watched from without by the executive authorities and checked if they run off the right course? The famous resolution on Local Self-Government Act of 18 May, 1882 also contains the same spirit which reads as follows :

It is not primarily with a view to improvement in administration that this measure is put forward and supported. It is chiefly designed as an instrument of political and popular education. . . As education advances there is rapidly growing up all over the country an intelligent class of public spirited men who it is got only bad policy, but sheer waste of power, to fail to utilize.

According to the Act, a three-tier local administration system was introduced in Bengal.<sup>9</sup> Among the three tiers District Board was to be created at the district level, Local Board at the sub-divisional level and Union Committee at the union level. The Union Committee was given the responsibility of performing a number of community services such as construction and maintenance of roads, maintenance of schools, ponds, drainage and sanitation facilities etc., but only under the control and supervision of the District Board. Tinker observed, "... every province except Assam, Burma, C. P. and Madras entrusted the District Board with all the funds and almost all the functions of local government. Most of the Acts made provision for the delegation of money and powers to the smaller bodies at the discretion of the District Boards . . ."<sup>10</sup>

The Act provided for the election of two thirds members of the local bodies. But no villager was interested to seek election partly on account of responsibilities that membership might entail and partly to avoid the risk of incurring the displeasure of the village influentials as well as of the local *zamindars* who had been in the control of village life through their com-

mand over village land. Moreover, education, civilization and material progress introduced by the British could not make considerable dent in the life of rural people which alone could create ambitions and aspirations among them, urging them to find an outlet for competition and control.

The system itself, with the lapse of time, came to acquire disrepute owing to mainly excessive control of bureaucracy. The Union Committees could bring no change in rural life as they had to depend for all practical purposes upon the District boards which themselves were starved of money, narrowly restricted in the exercise of their functions, as they could pass only scraps of routine work on to the subdistrict boards who could, therefore, never awaken into life. The Bengal District Administration Committee Report, 1912-13 also observed, "it was a mistake to make the District Board the administrative unit of local self-government and to leave the smaller bodies dependent on its charity."<sup>1</sup> Enquiries made by the Royal Commission upon Decentralisation under the chairmanship of C.E.H. Hobhouse also uncovered the evidence that local bodies has not developed as had been hoped in Ripon's day. According to the report, "In every direction rural boards had to function within the most narrow restriction, and it was not, therefore, surprising that they had acquired no genuine 'local' or 'popular' character by 1908. Village life was not still associated in any way with the 'training in government' supposedly represented by local institutions: village opinion was expressed chiefly in a chorus of complaint that, while

they were taxed by the district board, no benefit ever descended to them'.<sup>12</sup> The Commission's recommendations insisted that the foundation of any stable edifice which shall associate the people with the administration must be the village and, therefore, considered the re-establishment of the *Panchayat* as the vehicle of new types of village government with the functions of petty civil and criminal jurisdiction, village sanitation, the construction of minor public works, and the building and management of village schools. It also recommended that the *Panchayats* should be supervised by the district officers, not by the district boards and they should not be subject to the tyranny of petty officials. The Commission was appointed in 1907 to inquire into the financial and administrative relations of the Government of India and the provincial governments and of "authorities subordinate to them, and to report "whether by measure of decentralization or otherwise", the system of government might be simplified and improved.<sup>13</sup> It submitted its reports in 1909 but immediate effect was not given to it. was only in August 1917 the Government made a declaration promising 'responsible government' to India through 'the gradual development of self-governing institutions'<sup>14</sup> and as a result the Village Self-Government Act of 1919 was passed. The Act was made on the basis of the report made by Montague-Chelmsford in 1918 which recommended for the integration of local influentials with the system of local administration.<sup>15</sup> A two-tier system of local self-government with district board at the level and union board at the union level was introduced.

ced in Bengal under the Act. Thus the Act abolished the local boards<sup>15</sup> and Union Committees with the Union Boards.

A Union Board was suggested to be established for an area of about ten square miles with a population of about 8,000. Two-third members of the board were to be elected and the remainder were to be nominated. The board was given the right to elect its president and vice-president from among its own members. The Act provided it with the executive, municipal and judicial functions and original financial powers to support their activities.<sup>16</sup> It was also given the responsibility to construct and maintain roads and bridges, instal and maintain tube-wells, run charitable dispensaries and primary schools and few other public works such as the distribution of food, clothing, and other essential commodities as sanctioned by the government from time, to time, particularly in times of distress and in addition to the maintenance of village peace, the resolution of petty disputes.

Though the Union Committees were replaced by Union Boards, in most cases there was no change in the Union boundary and positions of power were still being dominated by the same set of people. The only difference was that with the passing of time the powerful persons were replaced by their own people, in some cases by their kin and in still others by their sons. Thus the leadership positions tended to become, more or less, hereditary in nature. The system, therefore, failed to bring any change in the countryside though it continued up to the passing of

the Basic Democracies Act in 1959. Of course, a provision was made in 1956 for the direct election of the president and Vice-president of the Union Boards. But the local scene along with the power structure remained unchanged.

Under the Basic Democracies Order of 1959 a four-tier<sup>17</sup> administrative system was promulgated with the objective to "effect democratic decentralization by bringing will of the people closer to the government and the personnel of the government closer to the people."<sup>18</sup> At the Union level, it created the Union Council to replace the Union Board and, at other levels of *Thana* district and division the tiers were *Thana* Council, District Council and Divisional Council respectively.

The Union Council was to consist of both elected and nominated members.<sup>19</sup> The elected members were to be elected by the Union people directly on the basis of universal adult franchise. The chairman and vice chairman of the council were to be elected by the council members from amongst themselves. In a way it could be said that Union Council seemed to be the replica of the earlier Union Board but there were some important differences between the two. The chairman and vice-chairman of the Union Council, unlike the president and vice-president of the Union Board, would be elected indirectly. The members of the Union Council who were called as Basic Democrats (BD) would also work as members of the electoral college to elect country's National and Provincial Assemblies and also the country's Chief Executive, the President.



The members of the Union Boards have no such rights. Thus the members of the Union Council had more important role and enjoyed more power than the Union Boards of the past. The functions that were assigned to Union Council also gave it greater role to play.

To boost up Basic Democracies system and help rural people to participate in a constructive and meaningful manner in the administration and development of their local area a programme called Rural Works Programme (RWP) was launched in 1962-63. The programme entrusted the Union Council with "both planning and implementation of the local projects."<sup>20</sup> The manual for the programme prescribed for the formation of the union plans in consultation with the ward people, the implementation of which was entrusted to the project committees consisting of leading village people headed by a Union Council members. The government was maintaining a very close link with the BDs through the RWP. The grants for the RWP would work as a sort of patronage from the ruling regime and, in return, they would expect people's support. In fact, the BDs turned to be the tools and stooges of the government that was characterised as anti-people particularly in East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) and the system was the main target of attack during the periods of various movements like the six-point and eleven-point movements and the liberation movement of Bangladesh. The system was abolished soon after the independence of Bangladesh.

After independence, the country took up a reconstruction programme and along with that the work of

relief and rehabilitation. For the purpose, relief committees were appointed in each Union suspending the Union Councils. The relief committee chairmen were all nominated and they mostly belonged to the Awami League. The temporary arrangement was in operation till 1973 local council elections. In 1975 the system got suspended in the wake of a different system with change in the country's basic administrative structure from a parliamentary to a presidential system under the leadership of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman. He planned to introduce compulsory cooperative system in rural areas and to develop a systematic leadership cadre to run the affairs there. But, before the arrangement could be completed, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was assassinated and the post coup government once again revived the Union *Parishad* system.<sup>21</sup> In 1976 a new local government ordinance was promulgated which provided for Union *Parishad* at the union level, *Thana Parishad* at *Thana* level and District or *Zilla Parishad* at the district level. The Union *Parishad* was to consist of a chairman, 9 members to be elected by the people directly and 2 nominated women members.

President Zia-ur-Rahman introduced some programmes during his regime that had much impact on rural life in the country under the broad framework of his 19-point programme. He started a countrywide canal digging programme involving both official dignitaries and village people. He made frequent visits to the countryside and talked to village people with a view to motivate them to undertake developmental works. The introduction of *gram sarkar* and village

defence party, at the village level and *yuva* complex or youth co-operatives at union level also affected the life of the rural people in good measure.

The scheme of *gram sarkar* was introduced under the *Swanirvar Gram Sarkar* Order, 1980 with four-fold functions: (i) increasing food production, (ii) mass literacy, (iii) population control and family planning, and (iv) law and order. This was for the first time that the villages were going to have their own formal administrative organisation at the village level. It was to consist of 12 members including the *pradhan*. The posts were reserved for women. If I am to cite the case of my own village I saw the villagers took keen interest in selecting the members of the *gram sarkar*. But the system had a very short life and was abolished immediately after the March 24, 1982 military take-over. Thus there has hardly been any scope to examine the system's impact on the country's local administration system. Barakat-e-Khuda has, however, conducted a study on *gram sarkar* was observed, "...*gram sarkar* is an extension of the existing rural power structure...nothing but a protection to the rich and the powerful..."<sup>22</sup>

The present government has, inspite of major political parties' opposition, introduced *Upazila* system with objectives to ensure greater participation of the people and planned and co-ordinated development for the vast rural masses of the country.<sup>23</sup> *Upazila* is a new name given to the old *thana* and, hence, there is no difference between the *thana* and *upazila* with respect to area and population. Government has also upgraded subdivisions

into districts and subdivisions are no more in existence. Thus the structure of the country's local government stands a three-tier system with *zila parishad* at the district level, *upazila parishad* at the *upazila* level and *union parishad* at the *union* level. Of course, the total number of *zila parishad* has increased and unlike *thana parishad* *upazila parishad* has been made the centre of importance through instituting elected chairman, establishing civil and criminal courts, posting high level officials and granting of authority to raise its own fund.

*Upazila parishad* consists of one chairman directly elected by the *upazila* people on the basis of universal adult franchise, chairman of the constituent *pourasavas* and *union parishads*, three female members nominated by the government from amongst the women of the *upazila*, one person nominated by the government from amongst the *upazila* inhabitants who is eligible for the election to the post of the *upazila* chairman, chairman of the *upazila* Central Cooperative Association and the heads of different government departments in the *upazila*. The official members, however, have no voting right.<sup>24</sup>

The *upzila parishads* has been given the task of preparing both five-year and annual development plans, assisting constituent *union parishads* and *poura savas* in preparing and implementing their plans, launching various promotional activities like health and family planning, employment, socio-cultural activities, co-operative movements, educational and vocational activities, and protection and promotion of environment etc. It has also been given the activities pertaining to

functional co-ordination and control of various departments in the *upazila*. The task of the *parishad* is, therefore, massive and important, though the *parishad* is very much under the control of the national government. According to the Local Government Ordinance, 1982 *upazila* development, plans require the sanction of the national government while the national government can quash the proceedings, suspend the execution of any resolution along with the right to enquire into any issue inconsistent with its policy.

The first comprehensive effort to regenerate rural economy was started in 1953 with the launching of the village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) Programme. The programme was introduced as a coordinated effort of the central and provincial governments. The aim of the programme was to deal with the problems of the villagers assisting them to plan and implement self-help programmes and designed to eliminate or reduce their common problems. The government assistance was also designed to inspire confidence in their own capability so that they might act in an organised manner and co-operate fully among themselves. The programme symbolised a movement away from government help to self-help.

To carry out the objectives of the programme the village workers (who were expected to be the spearheads of the programme) were placed at village level. Looking at the ecological conditions of the villages and taking the available resources into consideration one village worker was given the charge of seven villages. They were trained in the basic knowledge and skills of the various

nation-building departments and made to work as friend, philosopher and guide to the villagers. These village workers would carry the basic knowledge and the technical schemes to the doorsteps of the villagers, demonstrate to them the use of modern methods and appliances (which could raise their productive output and increase their income), and popularise among them such social activities as would create for them conditions for richer and better life. They were to make them realise the blessings of the cooperative efforts and the benefits of local leadership. The villagers were also encouraged to form their Village Councils of Elders and to frame their plans and programmes through the council. The condition was that nothing would be doled out to villager as a gift nor would any work be undertaken unless the villagers deserved it by preparedness to make their own contribution to it.

The programme also initiated some schemes for women and youths. Youth clubs were organised. The philosophy behind this was that the youths were impressionable and could absorb new ideas more quickly and put them into practice more zealously and even more effectively than the others. It was also felt that what the youth of the villages would learn would be helpful in educating the elders at home.

The process would also help knit together the various administrative agencies down to the village level, with the representatives of the technical departments as well as local leaders.

It is worthwhile to add that the V-AID programme was redesignated as National Development Organiza-

tion in 1958 as it would sometimes be misconstrued as village aid.

The organization was a semi-autonomous agency. But owing to the shortage of funds, lack of training facilities and the instability of central and provincial government the programme could not make much progress and ultimately met a sad demise in 1961.

Comilla system takes its name from its laboratory area Comilla *Thana*. It is a product of sincere and systematic, committed and continuous experiments made by the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BARD) under the able leadership of a former ICS officer Akhtar Hameed Khan, originally a man from the Indian State of Uttar Pradesh.

This Academy evolved a two-tier cooperative system with primary cooperative societies at the village level and Central Cooperative Association at the *Thana* level. The social scientists at the Academy conceived village as a self-contained unit and considered it as a more convenient basis to organize the villagers into homogeneous groups as the villagers would have a face-to-face relationship with mutual understanding and confidence among themselves. A village based primary cooperative society, comprising of small and middle farmers, was suggested with the objective of developing a self-sustained unit where the members would be exposed to modern machinery and equipment, accumulation of savings for the future and use of credit for the improvement of agriculture. They would sit together in a joint weekly meeting to discuss individual and village problems and to chalk out work plans. They

would elect few representatives like chairman, manager and model farmer to undergo training and to learn improved techniques of agriculture, business management, and principles of cooperatives credit, machinery, irrigation facilities, and fertilizer etc., were distributed on cooperative basis from a collective fund, but the villagers were not to pool their land, and thus private ownership was to be retained.

The village based primary societies, known as K. S. S. in short form, were federated in an apex association at the *Thana* level. This association was given the name of *Thana* Central Cooperative Association (TCCA). The prime responsibility of the association was to supervise and guide the primary societies and impart training to the representatives and other workers such as organizers and village accountants. The training would be given on cooperative rules and such other business methods as conduct of meetings, maintenance of registers and accounts, preparation of production plans, banking and credit rules, procedures concerning deposits of savings and so on. The representatives of the societies were also given training in improved methods and techniques of agriculture like balanced use of fertilizers, use of tractors and power tillers, irrigation by power pumps and deep tube wells, selection of better seeds and production of new crops as well as information in regard to family planning, public health, adult education, fisheries, animal husbandry, etc. An overview of the model is provided by Bertocci in the following words :

... a cooperative system was developed consisting



of small village credit cooperatives run by villagers, and a central cooperative at the *Thana* level, which was responsible for promoting new agricultural technology and providing the necessary agricultural supplies, extension training, credit and supervision of record keeping. The requirements that a village select three individuals who were to be their own cooperative leaders and who would receive training at the Academy made unnecessary the injection of outsiders into the village cooperative scene. As a result of this approach, the Comilla cooperatives have been based upon natural social groupings.<sup>25</sup>

The Academy started this experiment on the clear assumption that they knew nothing about the village, the villagers and their problems. Thus their *modus operandi* was to go to the villages, contact the villagers, know their problems from them and get measures for solution also from them and then try to help implement them. This approach would remind one of late Chairman Mao Zedong whose slogan was "from the masses to the masses" which means "take ideas from the masses (scattered and unsystematic ideas), then go to the masses to propagate and explain these ideas until the masses embrace them as their own, hold fast to them and translate them into action and test the correctness of these in such action."<sup>26</sup>

Thus Comilla system has been replicated throughout Bangladesh since 1970 under the title of Integrated Rural Development Programme (now Bangladesh Rural

Development Board). One of the unique characteristics of the Comilla system was the provision of continuous training to the representatives of the cooperative societies and other people related to cooperative activities. The development of leadership and technical skills at village level was thought to be a precondition for launching any development programme and, therefore, continuous training was made a part of the process. The training was being given by the *Thana* Training and Development Centre (TTDC) located at the *Thana* headquarters, where all the officers of the nation-building departments would be available. These officers would play the role of the teachers. The village leaders would come once a week to participate in the training activities. The most significant contribution of the experiment has been the emergence of new relationship between officers and villagers—a friendly partnership like that of teacher and students. The village representatives or leaders would bring village problems with them to be discussed thoroughly in the training class which, in turn, would make the officers' information pool about village situation upto-date. The officers would give the leaders new ideas and instructions. In a healthy and lively situation, therefore, there could be exchange of ideas and information between the two parties. Reflecting on the nature and achievements of TTDC, Akhtar Hameed Khan once said :

there is guidance and supervision without undue subordination. There is trust arising from mutual knowledge. Village leaders still retain their traditional politeness ; but gone are the silent docility

and the sycophantic respect, born out of false fear and false hope. They have now realistic view of government and its agencies at the *Thana*, not as mysterious and dreadful forces like Almighty God, who give or take as they please, but as human agencies with limited resources, established for their benefits, and solicitous of their loyalties. This small psychological shift produces big results—the seed is becoming a tree.<sup>27</sup>

Another programme called Rural Works Programme (RWP) was developed by the Academy of which mention has already been made. The programme was designed to provide gainful employment to the unemployed or underemployed or partially employed, undertake projects for productive purposes through large scale public participation and build up local leadership through the opportunities which active participation in the programme would offer to them.

At the independence of Bangladesh the spirit of sacrifice and work for others with others emerged as a strong factor to start voluntary development projects in different parts of the country. The process started while the country was at war with the colonial Pakistan forces. *Ganamilan* at Gurudaspur, Rajshahi, Azizul Haq College *Swanirvar Karmasuchi* at Bogra, *Swanirvar Kuzipukur* at Rangpur, *Shahjalaler Shyamal Sylhet Prokalpa* at Sylhet, and the programme of Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC) at Sylhet are some of the programmes in point. Most of the programmes died afterwards but as experiments, they did help a nationwide *Swanirvar* Movement to emerge.

Writing on the '*Swanirvar*' Movement, Chashi (one time Special Secretary, *Swanirvar* Movement) says, "The word '*Swanirvar*' in Bengali means self-reliant or dependent on one's own self. In the context of the *Swanirvar* movement, the term has been used in its broadest sense, meaning self-sufficiency at each level of society starting from home base to the national level. To be more precise, an overall national self-sufficiency is not the sole goal as even after the attainment of such goal a large segment of people, individually or area wise, may continue to depend on others or on the economy as a whole. The programme stands to make each family, each village, each union, each *thana*, each sub-division, each district and the nation self-sufficient. The goal is to try to make as far as possible all these strata self-reliant in every aspect of their needs"<sup>28</sup> The objectives of a *Swanirvar* village have clearly been spelled out in a study of Bogra Rural Development Academy as follows :

- a) to stand on their own without depending on others ;
- b) to utilize own resources ;
- c) not to keep anyone of the village hungry ;
- d) to employ everyone of the village and to compel them to work ;
- e) not to keep anyone illiterate ;
- f) to keep the village clean and develop it properly ;
- g) to sacrifice self-interest for sake of villagers ; and
- h) to sacrifice each for all.<sup>29</sup>

Another programme was developed as self-reliant project and was known as Ulshi-Jadunathpur (UJ) project which was given importance by the government under

Ziaur Rahman.

Unlike RWP, the UJ project grew out of the local initiative and local planning and was executed through a process of participation, mainly in the form of voluntary contribution of labour, by both the local people and government functionaries of the area, some of whom had no official responsibilities for development work. The financial responsibilities of the government was kept confined only to the payment of compensation for the land acquired and the purchase of small equipment, and mechanism developed for financial contribution by the relatively affluent among the local people for payment of wages to the labour, drawn from amongst the local landless. It is also noteworthy here that the district authority took upon itself the responsibility to execute the project through the mobilization of people and local resources on the basis of principle of self-reliance when the government at the national level, though aware for long of its importance and the local demand for its execution, had found it impossible to implement it, primarily because of financial constraints and priorities in other areas.

The structure and strategies had been well-devised. The first strategy was to shift the attention from the *Thana* to the village as a Basic unit of development, to approach it as a whole and to get all the people in the village, irrespective of their social position, involved in the process of development. Secondly, emphasis was placed on the need to minimize both the absolute size and the rate of assistance from outside, as well as the involvement of the external

agencies, beyond the unavoidable limit, to ensure the realization of maximum self-reliance attainable by the people of a geographically and economically homogenous area. Thirdly, each adult male member of the community and from amongst the women-those who could do so-was called upon to make his/her contribution which he/she could do in the form of either labour or capital. Fourthly, all the people of the village, both male and female, were made collectively responsible for planning, executing and supervising development projects, each member having an equal voice. Finally, the attack on poverty was made simultaneously on all fronts.

The structural design of the project prescribed for the intergration of governmental administration with management of village affairs and to cover the interest of all the classes in village.

The *Gram Parishad*, meaning the village assembly, was given the overall responsibilities to run the village and to formulate and implement its development projects. It had four committees, all elected, attached to it and each being responsible for law and order, agriculture, education and health and family planning. Women were given special representation on all these committees. In addition, each village had three other associations representing the landless, women and the youth of the village with the responsibility to protect and maximize the interest of the concerned groups.

The *Parishad* was made up of the entire population of the village. The *Gram Sarothi*, the village pilot, was its elected head, The *Gram Sampadak*, the village

secretary, would assist the *Gram Sarothi* in the discharge of his duties.

The treasury of the *Gram Parishad*, the *Gram Tahsil*, would be funded through the imposition of a levy at a flat rate on all the adults and, in addition, of project-specific taxes on land-rich and the affluent traders, the amount varying on the basis of the size of the land and nature of other assets owned.

Each project village also had one training centre. This was designated as the Village Training and Development Centre (VTDC).

At the union level a Union Training and Development Centre (UTDC) was set up around the union office on the model of TTDC under Comilla system. These centres functioned as the common meeting place of the farmers, the visiting government functionaries, the family planning organizers and the literacy workers. They worked also as a mechanism to activate and strengthen the Union *Parishad* and to provide the *Gram Parishad* with institutional facility to hold its sessions, organize training and interact with external agents.

In 1974-75 another programme has been introduced by the government namely Food for Works Programme (FFWP) almost in the pattern of RWP.

In addition to the government sponsored programmes there are more than six thousands non-government organizations (NGO's) operating in the countryside.<sup>30</sup> These organizations provide both material and non-material assistance to the rural people but presently they work only with the target groups.<sup>31</sup> Thus the rural

people get divided among themselves instead of getting education, training and making them capable in linking with the national reconstruction stream line.

### III

The foregoing discussion makes it clear that both the local government system and rural development programmes have been made to undergo various changes but failed to ensure people's participation properly and, therefore, remained far from helping people benefit from them. This failure is both for specific reasons associated with the systems and programmes as well as some general causes. Let us take up the specific causes, first.

Given the nature of formation of the local bodies the leadership position has always been confined in the influential few. Under the nomination system prescribed by the *Chowkidary Panchayat Act*, 1870 people only with good connection with the *Zamindars* could get berths into the leadership position. Similar was the case with the Local Self Government Act of 1885 where it was clearly spelled out to ensure only the gradual training of the best, most intelligent and most influential men in the community to take an interest and an active part in the management of the local affairs. This tradition of leadership by the influentials has been found operative throughout the ages, no matter whatever elected elements have been inducted into the system. Not only this, powerful persons have made it nearly their monopoly. In my own union *parishad* only four persons belonging to two families have since 1870 been in the



position of the union chief, the present one being in the office from 1965. The first family was in power continuously upto that date. Rahman observes that the institution at the local level i.e. union *parishad* has always been dominated by the traditional conservative wealthy people of whom a sizeable portion has been permanently occupying the local government institutions.<sup>32</sup> Glaeser has also observed in 'Political Economy of Bangladesh' that something like 70% of the Union *parishad* leaders elected in 1973 are found to be connected in one way or another with the Basic Democrats.<sup>33</sup> The more revealing is the fact that the influence and power of the union *parishad* leaders are not confined to local politics only. They form the base of national politics and often go to bureaucracy and higher political leaders to get things done. The wrought-iron frame of the state which is designed in Dhaka or somewhere beyond the national territory gives a lot of importance to these rural tycoons.<sup>34</sup> Thus these rural tycoons or to use the term from Das Gupta<sup>35</sup> the rural conglomerates' form the rural social base of the state and control the institutions like union *parishads* to further consolidate their power. They are at the same time large landholders, principal traders, shopkeepers and village officials. Characteristically, they are basically feudal and maintain very close relations with the rulers at the national level, thus supporting the ruling party politically. This relations has been found to exist all the times under all regimes at least since the time of permanent settlement (1873) and has, in fact, been increasingly becoming stronger.<sup>36</sup> Jahangir

also observed that during the regime of Sheikh Mujib, the rural rich contended successfully for political power, and even though this class lost political power at the national level following the political changes in the latter part of 1975, it continues, to be dominant in the rural areas.<sup>37</sup>

Any examination of the functional responsibilities of local bodies under different Acts would reveal that they have always been entrusted with large number of functions but the resource was comparatively very limited and hence they had to depend on the government for fund which would come mainly as grant. Thus the development activities which could enthuse people to come closer and take interest could hardly be materialized. Even the present *upazila* system is not free from this resource constraint and has to depend on the government grants for its developmental activities. Thus owing to financial stringency the local bodies could never awaken into life.

Apart from the control that is attached with the financial grant the local bodies, have always been found to be under much control of the higher bodies. Mention may be made of the Bengal District Administration Committee Report (1912-13) and the report of the Royal Commission upon Decentralization (1907-9) where it had clearly been said that it was a mistake to make the District Boards controlling body over the local boards.

Under the Basic Democracies system also the main target of attack was a flaw in the system itself. It was wrong to make the BDs both the union council members

and at the same time the members of the electoral college. People would elect them as their representatives in the local councils but would not like them electing country's President, National and Provincial Assembly Member's and so. Moreover, their place and role in the field of RWP had been a serious point of objection and, therefore, the system utterly failed to bring will of the people closer to the government' as planned.

Government's treatment towards the local bodies had also been a point that attracts one's attention. Under all acts and Ordinances the government would intend and fashion the local bodies so as to serve their purpose, and the local bodies, more or less yielded to the government's will. Thus Tinker's observation on *panchayat* committee members under the Act of 1870 has been found applicable to all bodies including the present *upazila parishads*. He characterized them not as the representatives of the village folk but as servants of the 'sarkar', the government.

The leadership position in the rural development programmes has also been found to remain confined to the local influentials. Even the small farmers' cooperative under the Comilla system (now replicated throughout the country) have come under the grips of the well-to-do farmers who opposed the system's introduction. Under this system all inputs and services come through the cooperative groups and therefore, the leaders take all advantages. The situation has taken a more serious turn with the introduction of the elected chairman for the *Upazila* Central Cooperative Association. He is a

member of the *Upazila Parishad* and has, therefore, every right, also responsibility, to speak on the issue of cooperative. It is needless to say that the cooperative activities in the *Upazila* will be shaped much by his will and action. The benefit will likely to go more to his supporters and his class people. We can all assume that it would hardly be possible for a landless or poor farmer to be elected to that position.

Though the question of leadership in the rural development programme has by all counts been the most important issue, we can talk of other problems too. As for example, the outside village workers under the V-AID programme would never be accepted by the villagers as their own people and hence, their participation was much restricted. They could not rely upon them, could not submit to them. The RWP and FFW programmes have always been seen as seasonal or lean period activity to help rural poor and they were, therefore, never designed to regenerate the rural economy. *Swanirvar* Movement and UJ project failed to achieve mentionable institutional and policy support and therefore, could not make much headway in the field of rural development. To cap all these we can mention of the provision of credit that runs through all the approaches of rural development. The credits are supplied by the commercial banks who get these from external donors like World Bank, USAID, Asain Development Bank etc. Writing on the subject Anisuzzaman observes, "rural development finance is almost entirely predicated upon the availability of foreign aid, grants, etc. . . Rural

development in Bangladesh is indeed another name for foreign aid."<sup>38</sup>

The general problems that have affected both the local government system and rural development programmes are :

- i) political instability in the country ;
- ii) change of policy with the change of regime ;
- iii) mass illiteracy ;
- iv) general reluctance on the part of the educated people to live in the rural areas and lack of regard for agricultural activities among even the educated people coming from rural agricultural families.<sup>39</sup>

Thus it would appear that the local government, inspite of its age, is yet to strike root in the country and rural/community development in Bangladesh after over three decades, remains to a large extent highly irrelevant and counter productive for the rural masses.

#### Notes

1. Participation is involvement through which one can influence decisions that affect him and his environment. It has also been conceived as a process in which two or more parties influence each other in making certain plans, policies and decisions. See M. A. Mannan, "Worker Participation in Industry : Experiences of Cotton Textile Industry in Bangladesh", *The Dhaka University Studies*, Part-C, V : 1 : 26.
2. The District Magistrate was empowered to form the *Panchayat* committee.
3. The *Zamindars* were expected to be loyal to the crown. See Abu Abdullah, "Land Reform and Agrarian Change in Bangladesh", *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, IV : 1 : 69.

4. See Hugh Tinker, *The Foundations of Local Self-Government in India, Pakistan and Burma*, University of London : The Athlone Press, 1954, p. 40.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 43.
6. *Ibid.*
7. Anil Chandra Banerjee, *Indian Constitutional Documents, 1957-1947*, Calcutta : A. Mukherjee & Co. Pvt. Ltd. 1946, p. 78.
8. Tinker, *op. cit.*, p. 44.
9. See Atiur Rahman, "Rural Power Structure : A Study of the Union Parishad Leaders in Bangladesh", *The Journal of Social Studies*, 4 : 93.
10. Tinker, *op. cit.*, pp. 52-53.
11. *The Bengal District Administration Committee Report, 1912-13*, Calcutta ; Government of Bengal, p. 85.
12. Tinker, *op. cit.*, p. 84.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 64.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
15. Edwin Montagu was then the Secretary of State and Lord Chelmsford was the Viceroy.
- 15a. These Boards were abolished in 1938.
16. The Bengal Village Self-Government Act, 1919, Calcutta : Government of Bengal, Chapter IV.
17. At the time of promulgation it had five tiers with the Provincial Advisory Council which was abolished with the implementation of the new constitution in 1962.
18. Shah Nazrul Islam Chowdhury and M. A. Jabbar, "Development Orientation of Local Government in Bangladesh : The Case of Union Parishad", in M. A. Jabbar (ed.), *The Bangladesh Journal of Agricultural Economics*, 2 : 1 : 304.
19. In a 1962 amendment to the Ordinance the provision of nominated membership was abolished.
20. Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan : Failure in National Integration*, Dhaka : Oxford University Press, 1973, p. 115.
21. Atiur Rahman, *op. cit.*, 95.

22. Barkat-e-Khuda, "An Extension of the Existing Power Structure in Rural Bangladesh : The Institution of Gram Sarker", in *Asian Affairs*, IV : 1 : 71.
23. See Nurul Islam Nazim and Nazrul Islam, "Upazila-Approach to Development Administration in Bangladesh : An Examination of its Efficacy", in *BISS Journal* 7 : 2 : 138 and 165.
24. Ahmed Samiul Hasan, "Democratic Decentralization, Local Government and Upazila System : A Survey (in Bengali)", in *Samaj Nirikshan*, 25 : 60.
25. Robert D. Stevens, Hamza Alavi and Peter J. Bertocci (eds.), *Rural Development in Bangladesh and Pakistan*, Honolulu : East-West Center Book, 1976, p. 100.
26. Jerome Ch'en, *Mao Great Lives Observed*, Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey : Prentice Hall, 1969, p. 169. Also See Khalid Bin Sayeed "Political Leadership and Institution-building under Jinnah, Ayub and Bhutto", Lawrence Ziring, Ralph Braibanti and W. Howard Wriggings (eds.), *Pakistan : The Long View*, Durham : Duke University Press, 1977, p. 242.
27. Akhter Hameed Khan : and Zakir Hussain, *A New Rural Cooperative System for Comilla Thana* (Third Annual Report), Comilla : Pakistan Academy for Rural Development, 1963, pp 15-16.
28. See D. C. Barman, *A Study of Rural Organizations : Their Role in Rural Development* (Mimeo.), Dhaka : University Grants Commission, 1978, p. 7 f. n.
29. *Ibid.*
30. Md. Jamiluddin Khan, "In the Context of the Reduction of the American Government Development Assistance and Increase of Non-government Assistance", a paper read in a Seminar Organized by the Bangladesh Policy Studies Centre on 2. 10. 1986. p. 1.
31. For further reading see Pieter Streefland *et. al.*, *Different Ways to Support the Rural Poor : Effects of Two Development Approaches in Bangladesh*, Dhaka : Centre for Social Studies, 1986.
32. Atiur Rahman, *op. cit.*, 95.

33. *Ibid.*, 80.
34. *Ibid.*, 106.
35. Ranjit Das Gupta, *Problems of Economic Transition : Indian Case Study*, Calcutta : National Publishers, 1970, p. 171.
36. Atiur Rahman, *op. cit.*, 91.
37. B. K. Jahangir, "Nature of Class Struggle in Bangladesh", in Emajuddin Ahamed (ed.), *Bangladesh Politics*, Dhaka : Centre for Social Studies, 1980, p. 66.
38. M. Anisuzzaman, "Choice of Rural Development Strategy : The Rhetoric and Reality in Bangladesh", in Anwarullah Chowdhury, Quamrul Ahsan Chowdhury and Kibriaul Khaleque (eds.), *Sociology of Bangladesh : Problems and Prospects*, Dhaka : Bangladesh Sociology Association, 1987, p. 160.
39. See S. A. Aluko, "Rural Economic Development", in Maxwell Owusu (ed.), *Colonialism and Change : Essays Presented to Lucy Mair*, The Hague : Mouton Publishers, 1970, pp. 137-38.