Charisma, Legitimacy and Crisis : Reflections in a Bengali Novel

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To the laity, MacRae (1974) asserts, the fame of Weber rests on his concept of charisma. A number of social scientists have also found it a powerful analytical tool for an imposing phenomenon of contemporary Third World (Dow, 1976 ; Benda, 1967 ; Fagen, 1965). Yet a theory of charisma is far from adequately developed in the writings of Weber. The concept has been found to be ambigious, contradictory and useless. In fact " ⋯ the vast torso of Weber's work, as it lies before us, can directly contribute to the current debates in social theory, unless it is throughly reinterpreted" (Roth, 1985 : XVIII). In the course of resurgence of Weberian studies in recent decades efforts have been undertaken to reinterpret the concept of charisma and even move beyond Weber to flesh out a theory of charisma. Schluchter (1985) has made a major contribution towards this goal by reinserting a clearer view of chairsma within a developmental matrix of Weber's theory. Cavalli (1987) has focussed upon a mesolevel analysis of charismatic process,

This paper joins these efforts to arrive at a clearer view of charisma by concentrating upon the formation and persistence of charisma. A particular weakness of Weber's formulation of the theory is his failure to account for the communicative process through which charisma is formed. He treats charisma as the legitimizing principle of a specific from of domination. It is an extra-ordinary power of the individual and it must be recognized as such by a group of people. But to treat anything as ordinary or extraordinary involves social valuation and, thus, the recognition of what is extraordinary must be grounded in some kind of prior norms. It means that extraordinary power is not the basis of charisma and also that the distinction between pure and routinized charisma, as made by Weber, can not be maintained. I would argue in this paper that charisma is a product of social negotiation which involves communicative act and performance through which existing norms are reinterpreted, reactivated or changed. Charisma is grounded in this interactive process. This process is frought with crisis ; calculated action and communication strategy may be extremely significant in overcoming these crises and maintain charismatic domination. Charisma is not necessarily a fount of irrationality.

These arguments are backed by an analysis of fictional narrative of one of the best known Bengali novels. The choice is deliberate. Literature is possibly the best counterpart of Weber's ideal-typical sociology poised to capture the meaning of human existence out of the flux and flow of reality.

Relevance of Charisma in Contemporay Third World

The phenomenon of charisma has been accorded a great deal of emphasis in the study of social structure and politics in contemporary Third World. Benda (1967) found the simultaneous emergence of charismatic leadership in various parts of the Third World as one of the most important phenomena of recent times. According to Dow (1967 : 328), charismatic element is pervasive in most African independence movements and some of them provide 'virtually ideal type' representation of the charismatic phenomenon'.

Yet a number of authors have found it ambiguous and imprecise. Ratnam (1964) points out that the concept of charisma .."has not in any substantial manner improved our understanding of the problems it touches on." Another author (Ake, 1966) argues that it rather distorts the political reality. Some (Wilner and Wilner, 1965) have lamented about the 'debased currency' that it has become. In a penetrating critique of the concept, Wolpe (1968) argues that it is useless and should be discarded. According to Cavalli (1987 : 319) "The concept of charisma, even when elucidated and integrated, can not suffice for empirical research".

Weber's Theory of Charisma

These arguments lead us back to Weber's own formulation of the concept, which is incomplete and contains an element of elusiveness. One source of ambigity in the concept of charisma lies in the fact that Weber's ideas on it underwent changes several times. In the Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of

Capitalism which was published in 1904-1905, charisma is mentioned only once and in the Christian sense (Cavalli, 1987). Prior to 1913, Weber was mainly concerned with charisma in its religious form. During 1913 to 1916 he expounded charisma as an ideal-type of legitimate domination – a historical category characteristic of an early stage of human development, which ultimately led to the legal-rational domination. From 1916-17 he recognized the possibility of the eruption of charisma in any form of society alongside the developmental trend. Later Weber again changed his view and found it universal and regarded it as the well-spring of creativity and innovation and underscored its revolutionary potential. But these different versions were never systematized (Mommsen, 1987).

A second source of ambiguity is grounded in the definiton of the term itself. According to Weber (1966 : 358 9)

The term "charisma" will be applied to a certain quality of an individual personality by virtue of which he is set apart from ordinary men and treated as endowed with supernatural, superhuman, or at least specifically exceptional powers or qualities. These are such as are not accessible to the ordinary person, but are regarded as of divine origin or as exemplary, and on the basis of them the individual concerned is treated as a leader. In primitive circumastances this peculiar kind of deference is paid to prophets, to people with a reputation for therapeutic or legal wisdome, to leaders in the hunt and heroes of war. It is very often thought

of as resting on magical powers....

But the above definition is not adequate in itself. Weber adds a qualifier to it. The validity of charisma depends upon the recognition of the extra-ordinary power of the leader by the followeres. Even recognition alone is not sufficient. In the case of genuine charisma the basis of legitimacy "lies rather in the conception that it is the duty of those who have been called to a charismatic mission to recognize its quality and act accordingly" (Weber, 1966 : 359). This leads to 'complete personal devotion' to the leader by the followers. But this personal devotion will persist as long as the leader can show 'sign' or 'proof' of his extra-ordinary quality or above all benefit his followers. Charisma disappears as soon as personal devotion of the followers withers away.

Thus charisma belongs to the sphere of irrationality. Charisma is outside the realm of pure rational action. Weber came to hold "an antinomic model of historical change whose poles are charisma and rationalization..." (Mommsen, 1987 : 48). Pure charisma is highly unstable as it is outside the sphere of everyday routine. It undergoes transformation very quickly and become either traditionalized or rationalized or a combination of both. Weber calls this the process routinization.

This definition and the analysis of charisma which Weber provides raises a number of problems. First, it is not clear from Weber's analysis whether 'genuine, and 'pure' charisma refer to the same phenomenon. He mentions the example of Joseph Smith, the founder of Mormonism, as a possible swindler. It raises the problem

of distinguishing between authentic charisma and other related phenomena, such as, popularity. The example of film stars is particularly relevant here (Alberoni, 1972).

The second problem as raised by Wolpe (1968) is more crucial. Weber treats charisma as an extra-ordinary quality of an individual. But the expression extra ordinary is evaluative. A category of phenomena called extra-ordinary can not be established without reference to some normmative standard. Similarly, Weber fails to analyse how recognition of the charismatic quality by the followers occur. There must be some normative standard in terms of which followers are impelled towards an emphatic sense of duty. Thus it is not charisma which is the basis of legitimacy. If it is argued that the mission defines the duty, then mission is the basis of legitimacy and not the quality of the leader. Once it is recognized that charisma is grounded in pre-existing norms, then the distinction between pure and routinized charisma largely vanishes.

Thirdly, Weber fails to specify the social processes or conditions under which charisma emerges. He mentions psychic, physical, economic, ethical, religious and political distresses as giving rise to natural leaders of charismatic-type. But it hardly touches upon the question why some or how some people come to possess the extra-ordinary quality and why they are accepted by another set of people—their followers. As Blau (1963:359) puts it, "In short Weber's theory...does not include an analysis of the historical conditions and social processes that give rise to charismatic eruptions in the social structure."

Fourthly, it is possible to interpret a few sentences of Weber to suggest that charisma will only persist as long as followers gain material benefits from the leaders. In such a situation rational and utilitarian motives may underlie the decision of followers to accept his domination. Again, coercion is often an element of magic and where magic and charisma are interlinked, coercion may prefigure in charismatic domination (Wolpe, 1968).

A recent interpretation of charisma, which rescues Weber from much of the above criticism, has been provided by Greenfeld (1985). According to her, pure charisma does not depend upon the leader's vision or message. It is generated through 'overtly expressed extreme excitement' (Greenfeld, 1985 : 120) of the leader. This excitement becomes an object of limitation. Those who are magnetized by the excitement of the leader accept his domination and become his followers. But such an interpretation limits the concept in a way that renders it almost useless for sociological analysis.

A more fruitful approach to charisma may be to regard it as a socially negotiated process in which communication and performance are elements of strategic import. The charismatic process may involve traditional norms and rational action. But in its overt form, charisma produces a hightened affective state among the followers through communicative performance. In its elementary form, charisma transmits physiological excitement, but developed forms of charisma involve symbolic communication backed by dramatic performance. The legitimation

of domination occurs partly through this communicative process.

Reflections of Charisma in a Bengali Novel

The problematics of charisma as discussed above will be illustrated through a fictional narrative provided by Syed Waliullah in his novel *Tree Without Roots* (1967). It was originally written in Bengali in 1948 and titled *Lal Salu* which literally means red cloth. It is acclaimed as one of the best novels in Bengali language. In this paper I will follow the original (Bengali) version of this novel (Hossain, 1986).

It will be little trite to say that literature provides us with a sub-universe of reality (Schutz, 1973) and ultimately both sociology and literature aim at creating meaning out of human existence. The novelist creates his sub-universe of reality in the same way as a sociologist does. He analyses "the data of social life, interprets them, and tries to determine their essential features in order to transmit them in writing" (Zeraffa, 1973 : 36). It is, therefore, hoped that the work under discussion will contribute towards our understanding of the phenomenon of charisma.

The story of the novel revolves round a pretending saint and a fake shrine and the way Majeed, the hero of the novel, established himself as the custodian of the shrine and, consequently, a saint in a village in Bangladesh.

Saints and shrines are an inseparable element of Muslim culture. Both have equally strong influences among the Berbers of Africa (Gellner, 1972) and muslims

of Bengal. Ahmed (1981) found that *pirism* was histo-
cally one of the most important religious institutions
for Bengal. The *pir* (saint) was 'credited with incredible
virtues and miraculous powers' and 'commanded blind
veneration' (Ahmed, 1981 : 59). Roy (1983) talks of
ubiquity and massive popularity of *pirs* in Bengal. Even
fictitous *piris* had a seminal influence over the 'little
tradition' of Bengal. *Pirism* involved a process of 'pirifi-
cation' through which a locality or site was made an
object of religious veneration.

The story starts with a short description of the larger
social space in which the story is set. It is a landscape
of over-population and poverty, ambitions and hunger,
restlessness and resignment, and conflicts and migration.
It appears like a wasteland. The fields are barren or
flooded. The first two pages provide us with a scene
of extra-ordinary crisis. This crisis envelops the bases
and different layers of human existence—ecological
economic, social and psychological. There is, however,
powerful influence of religion—Islam upon the life of
men. But hunger appears to be more powerful than the
iprospect for salvation.

The events of the story unfolds in a small village
called Mahabbatnagar. In this village some people
have achieved a little prosperity, but the level of religo-
sity is rather low. The sequence of events begins to
move with the dramatic entrance of Majeed in this
village. The first thing he did was to swear at the
villagers assembled before him in a shrill voice. They,
he charged, were illiterate and lacked knowledge of
the sacred things. They had failed to take proper car

of a saint, grave. He was referring to an old and abon-
doned grave of the village. Majeed told them that he
was in a far away place among the aborigines to preach
the message of God. But one day he had a dream.
The saint had appeared in the dream and entrusted
him with the mission of taking care of his grave. Instant-
ly he had left everything there and rushed to this place.

That the saint appeared to majeed in his dream
defines him as a holy man who is capable of communi-
icating with the sacred being. The dream also defines
his mission. The highly affective mode of communi-
cation which Majeed employed struck his listeners with
shame and guilt. The villagers' response was con-
ditioned by the normative standard of Islam as well as by
the dramatic performance of Majeed.

The old grave was endowed with all the glories of a
shrine. Villagers from far and away came to disclose
their anguish, hopes, failures and gratefulness, and offer
their coins to the shrine. The offering of money or
goods to the shrine (manat) is part of the established
practice. It was a regular source of income for Majeed,
but he did not have to solicit it. Money was offered to
the shrine and he got it as the custodian of the shrine.
Majeed became a wealthy man of the village. But to the
public he was disdainful of his wealth in the way Weber
described it.

Gradually, Majeed built up his domination in the
village. The *matbar* or headman became dependent
upon him for all sorts of decisions. Villagers also came
to him for advice and to perform religious rites.
Majeed's efforts were then directed towards re-estab-

lishing or strengthening the norms and rites of Islam. Through this activities Majeed was also able to gain an inner strength roots of which though lay above in the heaven and the mystery of the shrine.

His domination was inexorably linked up with the process of Islamicization within the framework of little tradition. Majeed was also possibly accepted by the rich peasants who could complete their upward social mobility through this process. Both Majeed and the village-chief (Khaleque Bepari) were partners in the dessimination of Islamic culture. The chief opened a religious school and Majeed exhorted children and adults to attend it. Even when he undertook coercive action to perform the rites of circumcision, it was never viewed as coercive by the villagers as it embodied a religions practice.

The novel tells us very little about the followers of Majeed apart from the headman. But it narrates the incident of a quarrelsome old man who had little faith in the power of Majeed. His wife used to torture him with the suggestion that the children was not really his. Majeed had learnt about it fron the old man's daughter and scolded the old man for his wife's unethical behaviour. The old man was able to guess who was the informer and beat her severely. The headman, under the influence of Majeed, called an assembly of the villagers to judge the matter. But the old man proved to be too cunning for the headman who was supposed to preside over the informal court. So Majeed took over, recited from the Quaran. narrated a related story about the wife of the Prophet. The

atmosphere was changed. Even the rebellious old man had become softened. Majeed went on to deliberate on the sin of his wife and then suddenly asked the old man whether he was confident of his wife's innocence. The man had his doubts and remained silent. Majeed shouted out the questions again. Finally, the man broke down and wept and later was found missing. The man possibly committed suicide under the pressure of cold and calculated communicative performance of Majeed who made a perfect blend of form and content to produce a radical change in the mind of this man.

According to Weber (1966), when two charismatic authorities come into conflict it is resolved through magical means or even physical battle. An episode of the novel spells out such a conflict. During a harvest time there arrived a visiting saint in a near-by village. News spread like bushfire that this man could perform unbelievable miracles and even stop movement of the sun. His charisma drew people from all around and there was hardly a soul to visit Majeed's shrine. Majeed, therefore, went to see the man and settle the score. Here again Majeed was extremely calculative. He began his offensive when the saint and his followers were at prayer later than the sheduled time. He began to swear at them like a mad dog. They had violated the rite of prayer and it was a joke with God. The shouting went on until the prayer was over. The opponents were unable to do anything during the time of prayer. After the prayer, the disciples of the other saint argued that the time of prayer was not over as the sun could not move without the order of the saint. But

they lost the case when shadows of the sun were measured. It did not settle the issue as the charisma of this saint was strongly institutionalized. Majeed left the area with his own followers. Later on some of his young followers who went to challenge the other saint ended up in a hospital.

A potential threat to Majeed's authority came from an educated young man who was trying to open a general school in the village. Majeeds strategy was to float a counterproposal for the construction of a mosque in the village before the village assembly and it created such a fervour among his audience that the idea of the school was abondoned.

But the real challenge to Majeed's authority came from his young second wife. The challenge partly came from the fact that she was not adequately socialized in Islamic norms. She was not used to observing the rites of Islam. She had no idea of the sacredness of the shrine or of Majeed. For her Majeed was simply a man too old to be her husband. Majeed's efforts at re-socializing her was not quite successful. Once when he found her asleep during the late-night prayer, he lifted her forcefully and left her alone in the shrine. On the way to the shrine she rebelled and spat upon him. She did not react much even when she was left alone in the shrine during a furious storm which had started by then.

The story ends with the storm which had damaged much of the crop. Men were watching their damaged crops and some one cried out that there would be nothing left to eat. Majeed's voice was still tough

and confident : "Don't betray your God. Have confidence
in him." Majeed made up the story of the shrine,
But he was a believer of Islam and he was able to
display an inner strength in the face of crisis. He was
confident and cunning in his public performance which
gave him success.

The story raises a number of questions. Majeed was
a deliberate swindler and his charisma may not be
authentic. It is also possible to argue that it is a case of
routinized charisma. Majeed is the carrier of the original
charisma of the saint and the dream is the ritual mecha-
nism through which transfer of charisma occurs. Inspite
of these limitations the story gives us a rare glimpse of
the micro-level process through which charisma is formed
and maintained. It also suggests that rational communi-
cation techniques may be quite successful at producing
a high level of irrationality and rational action is possible
within the framework of traditional social organization.

Conclusion

Charisma has been mainly analysed in terms of
structural or historical category. This paper has made
an effort to focus upon the phenomenon in terms of
social process. I have argued that it is primarily
communicative performance through which charisma
emerges and is maintained, and the process of legiti-
mation of this type of domination occurs. This process
is also grounded in pre-existing norms. In the lived
world there is an admixture of different types of action.
Beyond its elementary form which Greenfeld (1985)
has argued for, charisma involves affective, traditional

and rational modes of action. The fictional account analysed here makes it clear that rational techniques of communication can be employed within the framework of traditional norms to achieve a high level of irrationality or affective state among men and women. But it may not work for those who have failed to internalize appropriate norms. Charismatic domination is a socially negotiated process and this process is often precarious. Resistance loud or silent may always underlie the phenomenon of domination—a fact which has often been overlooked by sociologists and political scientists.

Notes

Syed Waliullah (1922-71) was a major Bengali novelist. The work under discussion was translated into French in 1961 by Anne-Marie Tarie Thiband and published by Editions du Seuil, Paris. It has also been translated into other languages including German (Hossain, 1966). In this short paper, I have only discussed selected episodes of the novel with particular relevance to the theoretical arguments presented earlier.

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