

Local Government in Bangladesh: A Brief Overview

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Summary

Bangladesh has a long tradition of local government. Its rural and urban local government is playing a very important role in fundamental development areas like health, water, sanitation, education, recreation, law and order and other sectors, which directly affect the communities they serve on day- to-day basis. Though local government system in Bangladesh is a decentralization process, yet it has been dominated by total dependence on national government. Inadequate mobilization of local resources is preventing local government to move on a sound footing. Moreover, owing to various reasons and factors, the Union Parishads are not able to fully exercise their taxation powers. On the other hand, due to delay in release of grant funds by the government, the Union Parishads cannot perform their functions properly. Local governments created the scope of women's involvement in good governance and social development. In 1998, the ordinance was amended and direct elections for seats reserved for women were mandated. This amendment is a milestone in the history of Bangladeshi local level elections. It creates women's participation in local government significant that is empowering women and eliminating gender discrimination. Without strengthening local government with more power and authority, skills and resources, women's participation, the process of local government reforms will remain unrealized and good governance and democracy cannot grow up institutionally. It is pressing need to strengthen local government in order to bring government closer to the people, promote dialogue between elected representatives of the constituencies they represent, ensure greater participation in decision-making, increase accountability, improve efficiency of service delivery, and promote diversity and innovation.

Introduction

Often local government has been erroneously considered an insignificant segment of the government. It is indispensable to differentiate between national government and local government. In scale and resources, job security and prospects, and technological erudition, the national government is far superior to the local government; on the other hand, ordinary citizens have easier access to decision-makers at local level than national/ central level.¹ Local government is regarded, as an organization constituted by the locally elected persons for performing the tasks of local arena.

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1 Siddiqui, Kamal ed. (1995) Local Government in Bangladesh, the University Press, Dhaka.

At the same time, it is increasing political thinking and activities of people and strengthening democracy. In South Asia, Local government is also known as local self-government and according to UN definition: "The term local self-government refers to a political sub-division of a nation or state which is constituted by law and has substantial control of local affairs, including the power to impose taxes or exact labor for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or otherwise locally selected".² Local Government is defined as the totality of processes or functions, which contribute to the development of a specific area as well as the norms necessary for mediating a harmonious integration of actions.³ Bangladesh has a long tradition of local government. The chapter III of the Constitution provides the legal basis and powers of the local government bodies. Under the 12th amendment of the Constitution in 1991, it has been stated: "Local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law. Every local body shall perform within the appropriate administrative unit such functions as shall be prescribed by Act of Parliament, which may include functions relating to:

- a) Administration and the work of public officers;
- b) The maintenance of public order; and
- c) The preparation and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development".

Local Government Category in Bangladesh:

Since independence in 1971, changes have been made from time to time in terms of the classification of tiers of local government but almost nothing has been to strengthen local government institution. The structures of local government system remained more or less the same. Local government in Bangladesh can be broadly divided into two categories: 1) Rural Local Government body, and 2) Urban Local Government body. Local Government Commission was established in 1996 that subsequently recommended a four tier rural local government.⁴ The main thrusts of the recommendations are: directly elected council chairmen at all levels; directly elected women at all levels; strengthening of councils in terms of authority, resource base, functional boundaries, local level planning, local budgeting and implementation; provision for bureaucratic accountability to local representatives at relevant levels; constitution of a permanent statutory Local Government Commission and a Finance Committee.

The rural local government as proposed by the local government commission would have four tiers:

- *Gram Sarkar*, (Village Govt.)
- *Union Parishad*,

2 Ibid

3 Mallick, Bishawjit (2004) Local Government: Local people's Institution A Compilation on Local Government Issue

4 Ibid

- *Thana/Upazila Parishad*,
- *Zila (District) Parishad*,

Among them, only the union parishads are working as rural local government.⁵ Urban areas have a separate set of local government. The Bangladesh Census Commission recognized 522 urban areas in 1991 (with a population of about 5000 or more) but only about 138 of the larger urban areas among these have urban local governments.⁶ The six largest cities have City Corporation status, while the rest are known as *Pourashavas* or Municipalities, which again are classified according to financial strength.

Hierarchy of Urban Local Government

City Corporation	Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Barisal & Sylhet
<i>Pourashavas</i> (Municipalities)	254 as of August. 2001; (excluding Municipalities)
Category	Annual income level
Class I <i>Pourashavas</i>	6 million +
Class II <i>Pourashavas</i>	2 million
Class III <i>Pourashavas</i>	Less than 2.5 million

Source: Mallick, Bishawjit (2004) Local Government: Local people's Institution A Compilation on Local Government Issue

In addition, there are also some urban centers that are under military Cantonment Boards. The City Corporation and *Pourashavas* (Municipalities) are true urban local governments. Though there are a large number of urban centers yet they are run under the administrative system of Union Parishad. Some urban centers have a large population but have not yet been declared a Municipality and therefore also remain under Union *Parishad* management.

In the year 2003, the election of the Union Parishad (UP) was the only ongoing rural local government body of Bangladesh. In this election, the people at the grassroots elected nearly 55,000 local representatives and about 13,000 women.⁷ The Union Parishad (Union Council) is a very important institution in Bangladesh that it can engage in playing a vital role of institutionalized democracy, good governance, and social development. Democratic practice at the grassroots can provide good governance in the local government.

Pourashavas (Municipalities) and City Corporations constitute the two types of urban local governments. The six largest cities of Bangladesh (Dhaka, Chittagong, Khulna, Rajshahi, Barisal, and Sylhet) are City Corporations. Other district's urban local government is named as *Pourashova* (Municipality).

The *Pourashava* (Municipality) Union *Parishads* (*council*) and City Corporation are elected directly by the people. Each *Poura Parishad* is supposed to have a Chairman and a Commissioner for each Ward, while a City Corporation is supposed to have a Mayor as head of the *Parishad* and a

5 Hasnat, Abdul Hye ed. (2000) Governance South Asian Perspectives, The university press limited, Dhaka.

6 Ibid

7 Mallick, Bishawjit (2004) Local Government: Local people's Institution A Compilation on Local Government Issue.

Commissioner for each Ward. The number of Wards depends on the size of the city. Although women can contest in direct election, there are also reserved seats for them. The tenure of an elected rural/local government is five years. The latest City Corporation elections were held in 2004 and union parishads elections were held in 2003.⁸ The mayoral election of Chittagong City Corporation was held in March 2005 due to legal embargo.

Functions of Local Government

Rural and urban local government bodies are entrusted with a large number of functions and responsibilities relating to civic and community welfare as well as local development. Local government commission in May 1997 had laid down the responsibilities of the various rural and urban local bodies.⁹ Union Parishad has also been assigned with the adoption and implementation of poverty alleviation programs directly by itself and through NGOs and cooperatives. It is responsible for 38 functions in following categories: 1) civic functions, 2) police & defense functions, 3) revenue & general administrative functions, 4) development functions, and 5) functions that may be transferred by the government. Like union parishads' functions, the urban local government has to accomplish those along with other additional functions.

During the past decade, *Pourashavas* and the City Corporations have been carrying out an additional function (on project basis) of slum improvement. The funding for this came from UNICEF.¹⁰ Dhaka City Corporation has even made the slum improvement an integral part of activities with its own funding and tries to rehabilitate slum dwellers and street hawkers. Besides, Dhaka city corporation recently has started to maintain a City Museum whose construction has already begun. There will be a large theater for dramatic performance. Some of the Municipalities maintain public libraries also.

Women's Participation in Local Government in Bangladesh:

Gender mainstreaming is an important focus of Bangladesh government for poverty alleviation and development with this end in view it has given emphasis on women's participation in all spheres for their empowerment. Women's participation in politics at national level and at local level is very much needed to strengthen governance and democracy. Following that, various steps have been initiated and implemented following the program parts of WID, GAD, Beijing plus 5 etc. The constitution of Bangladesh provides for formal equality of men and women. Women are entitled to the same fundamental rights as men. Article 10 of the constitution ensures participation of women in all spheres of national life. Article 65(3) provides for reserved seats for women in the parliament and Article 9 promotes the special representation of women in local government.¹¹ This is why in the

⁸ BBS (2000): Stastical Pocket Book of Bangladesh, GoB

⁹ op. cit

¹⁰ Ibid

National Parliament 45 seats are reserved for the women and since 1997 women have been directly elected in the Union Parishads election. Though these initiatives have been taken to increase women's participation in local governance remains generally very insignificant. The absence of operational guideline and terms of reference for female elected representatives, the limited capacity of the female elected representatives to operate in public institutions of this nature, the lack of awareness about their roles and responsibilities, the systematic discrimination and biases by male elected colleagues — all these are seen as factors impeding women's meaningful participation in local governance.

ADB responds to this dire situation by implementing a technical assistance program in Bangladesh.¹² Aimed at building the gender and development capabilities of the local government units, the technical assistance program has four specific project objectives. First, formulate strategies to transform local level governments into accountable, transparent and effective public service providers. Second, develop the capacity of women elected/nominated representatives of the local level government. Third, develop mechanisms for interface among local and national female representatives. Fourth, increase the local government officials' understanding of the relation of gender to poverty reduction and good governance.

These objectives are to be met by implementing a number of related activities. Local government acts; structures, and operational mechanisms will be reviewed to identify gaps between the laws and their implementation. Leadership skills and awareness of female elected members will be enhanced through a series of capacity building training on roles and responsibilities, local government act, and arbitration procedures. Forums of elected female representatives will be organized to facilitate networking among female local leaders and lobbying by advocacy groups. Regional study and workshops will be conducted to assess project impact and to share experiences.

Local government has initiated different programs to encourage women's participation in governance.¹³ Women ward commissioners mainly deal with women's issues, particularly for poor women, such as micro credit programs, handicrafts and professional training programs attracting women to join such programs. There are some positive impacts of these programs initiated by local government. Women are becoming very aware about their rights and local governments are compelled to facilitate their rights. Besides the participation of women in politics and urban governance, many programs have been undertaken in local governments (urban and rural). Gender training is being conducted in national institutes for local government for ward commissioners, government officials etc. There are other government, semi-government institutes and non-government Organizations (NGOs) that are conducting gender training. Through this sort of training program to sensitize the population on gender issues in local government, the national government

11 The Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, as modified up to 31st December 1998.

12 Mallick, Bishawjit (2004) Local Government: Local people's Institution A Compilation on Local Government Issue.

13 Siddiqui Kamal (2000), Local Governance in Bangladesh Leading Issues and Major Challenges, University press, Dhaka.

endeavors to overcome the backwardness of the position of women and to ensure more participation in local government. In such development work, the gender issue gets priority nowadays. However, there is no regular event or program being introduced for the ward commissioners to make aware of gender issues.

Local government created the scope of women's involvement in good governance and social development. In 1998, the ordinance was amended and direct elections for seats reserved for women were mandated. This amendment is a milestone in the history of Bangladeshi local level elections. One third of the available local seats of any municipality or corporation have been reserved for women. The commissioner of a reserved seat will be elected through direct election. It is common practice that political parties give support to their own candidates. Political parties, civil society and NGOs are all involved in encouraging women to participate in politics. The number of women members in local governments is increasing in each election. Before the pourashava ordinance (1998), there was no scope for women to participate in pourashava elections.

Women's Incorporation in local Governance is an appreciable step; however, the discriminatory election procedures and differential treatment in offices are responsible for perceiving women as 'partial' commissioners or members. For the alleviation of such discrimination, the following recommendations are made:

- the gender approach never focuses on 'women only' rather it sees women and men's relation in a particular socio-economic-political context. The government must take more concrete steps towards gender sensitization, among the ward commissioners as well as Governance. Along with the women, male commissioners should also be asked to participate in such trainings and mobilization program.
- all must be appreciated for their positive attitude towards women's participation in governance. Similarly, one must be discouraged or punished if they do not show positive attitude, or they harass women colleagues.
- all women must come through proper election. For the time being they may contest for the reserved seats, but it must be phased out gradually.
- while working in the office they must get work clearly defined responsibilities. It should carefully include women in various important committees, such as budget committee, financial committee, technical site committee and so on, etc.
- Women ward commissioners/members need their own office spaces with similar facilities like their male colleagues.
- The Government and political parties and NGOs should introduce gender awareness programs and manifestos. They, individually as well as in a combined way, can regularly organize these trainings, seminars, workshops, lectures etc. They also can create a favorable office atmosphere by monitoring their own members.
- Above all ideological changes will materialize only when the civil society will take it seriously. Therefore, academics and researchers must bring up these issues to the common people by their writing and work with simple and communicable languages.

— Women Ward Commissioners/union parishad members, as well as, other politically committed women/men are working whole-heartedly to change the inequality between women/men, their contribution must be acknowledged and they can be awarded by the government so that it becomes a source of inspiration to others.

Eventually if we are really committed to change the gender difference, we must work simultaneously to bring about changes in the institutional structure, the cultural understanding, and the ideological conditions together.

Intricacy in Local Government:

Local Government is supposed to an independent body to develop local areas, but Local Government in Bangladesh was never independent and still it is not. Since the inception of Bangladesh there has been perennial interference in Local Government by national government for petty party interests.¹⁴ Though the target of local government is the development of local people is very insignificant. Normally the rich people dominate in local government in both rural and urban areas; the poor have practically no 'say' in decision-making. These are the reason why local government cannot move smoothly in Bangladesh.

As functionaries of elected local, the rich are unwilling to mobilize local resource as it may hamper their interests. Moreover, the local government has no power to prepare their own budget.¹⁵ It has to depend all the time on national government for fund. The fund for allotted to the local government does not come smoothly and directly. That is why the local government has to limp in reaching its goals.

Union Parishads constitutes the most important and only effective on going tire of the rural local government system in Bangladesh. However, they face serious problems in performing their assigned tasks. Inadequate finance is the most serious problem faced by Union Parishads. The Union Parishad implements some major development projects with the annual government grants. The government also permits union parishads to charge taxes and fees on a limited number of resources. In practice however, they cannot perform all these functions owing to the acute scarcity of funds caused by poor and irregular collection of taxes, non-realization of taxes from government, semi-government and autonomous organizations for years together and insufficient government grants. Owing to various reasons and factors, the Union Parishads are not able to fully exercise their taxation powers. On the other hand, due to delay in release of grant funds by the government, the Union Parishads cannot perform their functions properly.¹⁶ The Union Parishads have project committees regarding various development projects. Nevertheless, many times Union Parishad members remain reluctant to attend in the meeting and the project completion delayed and is ineffective.

14 Ahmed, T (1999): *Decentralization, Local Administration and Local Governance* (in Bengali), CDL, Dhaka

15 Ibid

16 Siddiqui, Kamal ed. (1995) *Local Government in Bangladesh*, the University Press, Dhaka.

The Union Parishads have various functions that cover every facet of rural social and economic life. However, the success of the Parishads in discharging these functions depends largely on their competence, efficiency, and technical expertise of UP chairmen, members, and secretaries. Unfortunately, most of them do not have such potentials due to lack of education, training, and technical support.

The mentioned intricacy is making the urban and rural local government weak and unimpressive.

Initiatives for Sustained Local Government:

In order to create sustained local government it is needed to initiate a drastic decentralization program to give the elected representatives the necessary responsibilities, power, and resources. Along with the decentralization initiative, there must also be an effort to prepare the elected local leaders for the task ahead. They should be free from their traditional mindset regarding their roles and responsibilities and should transform and mobilize their present roles and enhance their skills, leadership, requiring appropriate training and empowerment.

Few issues to be addressed for strategizing and intending a sustained local government; Such as:

- enhancing capacity of local elected representatives;
- making effective cooperation/collaboration among and between different agencies engaged in local governance for rural development;
- enhancing of participation including gender equation, in the development process;
- effectuating accountability, transparency and local planning as key processes of local governance in the decentralization schemes;
- reflecting civil society concerns and views in planning, coordination and implementation of local government activities.

In order to create Local government well-built and sustained radical decentralization initiative is one of the preconditions instead of so-called decentralization. For effective and significant local government, as it is indispensable to eradicate gender discrimination as well as it is needed to develop relationship with Non-Government Organizations (NGOs).¹⁷ Making these efforts unbeaten a strong political vision, wisdom, and will to promote decentralization and development is required.

Conclusion:

Local government in Bangladesh is playing a very important role in fundamental development areas like health, water, sanitation, education, recreation, law and order etc. These areas directly affect the communities they serve on day- to-day basis. Without strengthening local government with more power and authority, skills and resources, the process of local government reform will remain

¹⁷ Siddiqui Kamal (2000), Local Governance in Bangladesh Leading Issues and Major Challenges, University press, Dhaka.

incomplete and governance and democracy cannot be developed on an institutional basis. It is pressing need to strengthen local government in order to bring government closer to the people, promote dialogue between elected representatives and the people they represent, ensure greater participation in decision-making, increase accountability, improve efficiency of service delivery, and promote diversity and innovation. At present there are some of issues of local government, which encourage us to be optimistic. For example the collaboration and cooperation among NGOs, private sector organizations (PSOs), community based organizations (CBOs), cooperatives and elected local government bodies in facilitating local development activities participation of disadvantaged groups of the people particularly the poor and women are representing in the elected local government bodies and it is making the local administration accountable and transparent. In spite of several shortcomings the local government played and is playing a vital role the development of local people and local areas. The local government has potentialities in contributing to the national development and accelerating the pace of sustainable national economic and social development. To achieve these goals various problems of local government should be resolved and the hurdles in the way of local government should be removed. The options and opportunities favored to us should be seized without any delay.

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