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**LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH: A CRITICAL STUDY OF SOME  
SELECTED UNION PARISHADS IN BANGLADESH**

**MD. RASHIDUL ISLAM  
SHEIKH\***

\* Assistant Professor, Department of  
Public Administration, Comilla  
University, Bangladesh. E-mail:  
[mrishikh@yahoo.com](mailto:mrishikh@yahoo.com)

**Abstract:**

Government and its functions may be classified into National, Provincial of State and Local. The administration of a locality or small community such as village, town or a city, by the body representing the local inhabitants, possessing a fairly large amount of autonomy, raising a part at least of its revenue through local taxation and spending the proceeds on services, is called Local Self-Government. The democratization of government management is a key prerequisite for local self-government development. The de-monopolization of ownership encourages multi-structure economy. The existence of sustainable and efficient government authorities is needed to create appropriate business conditions, covering a broad range of aspects: favorable rules of play, safeguarding of ownership rights, etc. Moreover, the sustainable economic development is possible only provided that the rules of play are adjusted to managers with average capabilities.

**Key Words:**

*Local Self-Government,  
Bangladesh, Union Parishads.*

## **1. Introduction**

Effective decentralization is an element of good governance and an expression of democratic practice. It is also a prerequisite for effective and efficient public administration. It is recognized that elected local authorities, alongside national and regional authorities, are key actors in democratic governance and administration. Local Government is a government which organized locally. Historically, local government was always there in Bengal. Only its forms differed from age to age. The ancient and medieval governments of Bengal were heavily dependent on village institutions, which made the structure of the local government. The village society was left to itself for its own governance. The king remained contented with its share in produce in the form of tax. There were state-sponsored institutions, such as village headmen and village councils of many denominations. These were instituted for double purposes: to collect tax and to keep the people together for keeping production going and for keeping the kingdom happy and prosperous. Local Governments also have a particular role to play in the effort to increase the participation in public affairs by excluded and marginalized communities and sections of society. Local authorities should be entitled to define appropriate forms of popular participation and civic engagement in decision-making and in fulfillment of their function of community leadership. This may include special provisions for the representation of the socially and economically weaker sections of society, ethnic and gender groups and other minorities.

## **2. Objective of the Study**

It seems that the problems of local government in Bangladesh are primarily structural in as much as they are product of the structural anomalies in the body politics arising out of past federal heritage as against a unitary present. Accordingly, the objective of this study is delineating the bellow;

- To investigate the existing problems of rural self-government system of Bangladesh, particularly regarding to its structure and structural-functional problems.
- To explore the historical background of colonial administrative pattern and its impact on existing local government system.
- To know the existing pattern of problems, functions and its dysfunctions in local self-government system.

### 3. Methodology of the Study

This study primarily is an empirical one to analyze the existing structure and functions of rural local self-government system in Bangladesh and its relations with the central government. The field research has been undertaken under a preliminary survey study. Both primary and secondary sources have been used for this study. Interviews were conducted based on pre-tested structured interview schedule. Primary data has been collected from seven union *parishads* in four *Upazilas* from two divisions in Bangladesh and respondent was 42 respectively. I took the respondent randomly in every union *parishads*. Table depicts that—

Union Parishad	Upazila Parishad	District	Division
Golapgonj, Binodnagar	Nawabgonj	Dinajpur	Rangpur
Sotogram, Moricha	Birgonj		
Bijaypur, Kalibari	Sadar (South)	Comilla	Chittagong
Madhaiya	Chandina		

For this study, secondary data were collected from review of the available literature on local self-government to get relevant information. The secondary materials were basically- official documents, government policies and acts, statistical reports of NGOs, research studies and newspaper clippings.

### 4. Limitations of the Study

Any social research dealing with human sciences is confronted with a variety of obstacles. During the study some respondents were hesitant and some were reluctant to answer certain issues like income, expenditure, rights, health facilities and access, violence etc. After persuasion of the discussion and explanation they personated me to carry out the conversation.

### 5. History of Local Government in Bangladesh

The institution of Local Government (LG) in Bangladesh goes back a long way. The origin of the existing local government institution can be traced back to the demand for self-government in British India. Initially, local government was developed by the British to maintain law and order in the rural areas with the help of local elite backed by local police. The local elites were to be nominated in the local government institutions from among those

who were trusted by the colonial authority. The British rulers institutionalized this system to perpetuate their political, economic and administrative ends and colonial extortion. In 1870, they introduced 'Choukidary Panchayet as the local government institution. This system was later changed and renamed in different regimes from the British to present Bangladesh as three-tier Union Committee (1885), two-tier Union Board (1919), four-tier Union Council (1959), and Union Parishad (1973) (Shafi, et.al, 2001: 3). After 1973, Union Parishad became the lowest unit of local government in Bangladesh.

There are two distinct kinds of local government institutions in Bangladesh – one for rural and another for urban areas. The local government in the rural areas represents a hierarchical system comprising three tiers: Union Parishad, Upazilla Parishad and Zilla Parishad while the urban local government consists of Pourashavas and Municipal Corporation. The following are the various decentralization strategies and developments in the local government system after 1971:

### **5.1 Mujib Period (1972 - 1975)**

*Mujib* paid more attention to national than local issues. Although the Union Parishad (Council) was designed as a decentralized body of local government and the election in 1973 was to ensure grassroots democracy, the Awami League did not hold elections to the higher level councils, nor did it take any measures to devolve authority to any of them. There was a substantial lacking of political and behavioral support among Awami League leaders for democratizing the system of governance. It was manifested when Sheikh Mujib abolished the parliamentary system altogether, introduced presidential rule under one-party rule known as BAKSAL, along with the 'governor system' introduced at the district level. After the independence in 1971, the Awami League government, headed by Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, brought the following reforms in the local government.

- 1) The system of basic democracies was abolished and government bodies carried over from the days prior to independence were dissolved.

- 2) Public officials were authorized to form committees at different tiers of government to fill the void created by the termination of some government bodies. The committees created for the interim, perform local functions.

- 3) District governorship introduced in 1973. This provided for a three-tier system with a directly elected Union Parishad (Council), a Thana development committee under the control of the sub-divisional officer and Zila Parishad under the control of deputy commissioner.

4) Union councils were elected but were not able to function effectively due to the coup in 1975.

### **5.2 Ziaur Rahman's Period (1975- 1981)**

In August 1975, Major General Ziaur Rahman seized all power as the Chief Martial Law Administrator. Nevertheless, Gen. Zia played a critical role in reviving the local government institutions in the country. The Local Government Ordinance 1976, promulgated by Zia, created Gram Sbaha (village councils) in an attempt to decentralize government down to the village level. In 1980, two years after General Zia became the elected president, all the Gram Sbahas were transformed into Gram Sarkar (village government) in each of the 68000 villages of Bangladesh. The Gram Sarkar was a body consisting of gram pradhan (village executive) and 11 elected members representing different classes of the village. The Gram Sarkar was a mini-government which could undertake planning and promotional programs.

The reforms initiated by Zia were different from the earlier policies of decentralization. The bureaucracy was given a free hand to control the local councils once again. These bodies of local government remained as the deconcentrated form of decentralization. The only exceptions were the Union Parishads and Gram Sarkars. The Gram Sarkar had many characteristics common to those of Mawhood model of decentralization. Although for the first time in Bangladesh, the Gram Sarkar provided for an equality of representation to various functional interests, many argue that implicit objectives of the reform package of decentralization during Zia's period was to gain direct political support for the military regime in its process of civilianization (Hossain, 1989).

### **5.3 Ershad's Period (1982- 1990)**

After Zia assassinated by a military coup d'etat in 1981, the Gram Sarkar was abolished by the new military regime of Ershad, which seized power in March 1982. In his first year of office, Ershad initiated the reform measures to decentralize the administration through the abolition of former subdivisions and upgraded the Thanas into Upazillas (sub-district). In hundreds of public meetings in the beginning of reform, Ershad and his associates of the Upazilla model pronounced that improving access and promoting participation were the primary goals of their reform. In contravention of this pledge to the nation, the military regime exploited every possible opportunity to weaken the democratic forces in the country and strengthened the

autocratic bureaucracy. The political history of Bangladesh was repeated in the 1980s as the Upazilla was politicized in favor of the ruling military regime the way Pakistan's dictator Ayub Khan used the system of Basic Democracies in the 1960s, and the Gram Sarkar of the 1970s.

#### **5.4 Khaleda Zia's Period (1991- 1996)**

It took Prime Minister Khaleda Zia only a few months after she came to power to abolish the Upazilla Parishad and reinstate the previous bureaucracy-dominated thana administration by promulgating the Local Government (Upazilla Parishad and Upazilla Administration Reorganization) (Repeal) Ordinance, 1991. In June 1992, a cabinet division resolution was passed to replace the Upazilla Parishad with Thana administration. Khaleda Zia's decision to depoliticize the Upazilla system was also due to the fact that her party Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) had only a handful of chairmen in the Upazilla of the country. Since BNP had not taken part in the first Upazilla election in 1985. In the second Upazilla election in 1990, BNP was placed at the 5th position getting only 24 Upazilla (out of 460) under its control. However, the abolition of the Upazilla is seen as a victory of the bureaucrats whose plan during this crucial period was to exploit the changed political situation to their own benefit. Ironically, the democratically elected government of Khaleda Zia indulged in anti-democratic practices with regard to decentralization.

Begum Zia, who failed to provide any new form of local government during her regime, is criticized for the persistent crisis in governance. The local government institutions have become weak. The NGO's effective intervention rendered the local government institutions purposeless since they failed to perform. The rural people apparently getting more resources from the foreign funded NGOs seemed to have distanced themselves from local government.

#### **5.5 Sheikh Hasina's Period (1996-2001)**

When Bangladesh Awami League came to power in 1996, it constituted a Local Government Commission and came up with a Report on Local Government Institutions Strengthening in May 1997. The Commission had recommended a four-tier local government structure including Gram/Palli (Village) Parishad, Union Parishad, Thana/Upazilla Parishad and Zila (District) Parishad. While local government bodies' exercised some degree of local autonomy, the central Government or a higher body in the administrative hierarchy of the state closely supervised them. Westergard (2000) observes that, 'like the previous local government

systems, the local bodies are controlled by the central government in all aspects.’ Mujeri and Singh, in their study on the impact of decentralization in Bangladesh, describe the patron-client relationship existing between the national and local governments. According to them, ‘the territorial jurisdiction, functions and revenue/expenditure patterns of different tiers of the local government is determined by central legislation and their activities are guided and supervised largely by departments/agencies of the central government.’

### **5.6 Begum Khaleda Zia’s Period (2001-2006)**

The government, after assuming power in 2001, initiated a change in local government structure. Gram Sarkar instead of Gram Parishad has been introduced, which has recently been legislated. These bodies will be created at the Ward levels. Each Gram Sarkar will represent one or two villages comprising about 3,000 people on an average. The UP member elected from the Ward will be the Chairman of the GS, which will have other members -- both males and female -- elected in a general meeting of the voters of the Ward under the supervision of a 'prescribed/ directing authority'. There are defined functions of the GS and other functions may be assigned to it as may be determined by the government from time to time. GS's will have the right to constitute issue-based standing committees as and when required, and determine the membership of such committees. The way the GS Act has been passed and its members selected in each ward, has been criticized by every strata of society. It is obvious that this has been done for strengthening the power base of ruling BNP in the rural areas.

The local government bodies had never been independent in Bangladesh, ‘self-governing’ bodies in the true sense of the term. They could simply be labeled as an extension of the central government with guided and limited local participation. Consequently, local governments have always been institutionally and financially weak, poorly managed and lacked social and political credibility. The importance and significance of earlier reform efforts with regard to local government lie in their contribution towards some incremental strengthening of the system. However, there is a consensus that the issues should be taken into consideration in future attempt to reform the local government institutions and reorganize them to make truly decentralized, institutionally effective, financially viable, participatory, gender sensitive, transparent and accountable.

## **6. Constitutional and Legal Basis of Local and Local Self-Government**

In any democratic polity, local government is given legal recognition either by an act of Parliament or by incorporation of relevant provisions in the Constitution (Khan,1996: 1). Bangladesh's Constitution of 1972 clearly spelt out the legal basis and responsibilities of local government. Article 59, Chapter III of the Constitution states that, 'Local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law'. Article 60 of the Constitution states 'for the purpose of giving full effect to the provision of article fifty nine, Parliament shall, by law, confer powers on the local government bodies referred to in that article including power to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare their budgets and to maintain funds (Constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh, as modified up to 30th of November, 1998). It is necessary to mention the constitutional and legal basis of the local government of Bangladesh because if the duties and responsibilities of the local government institutions are not demarcated by the Constitution or by the act of the parliament, or if there is no scope for the government to decentralize powers to elect local bodies, it is difficult to devolve powers. It is evident that the legal basis of the local government is clearly spelt out in the Constitution and the Article 59, Chap III has ensured the devolution of power to local government bodies.

## **7. Functions and Responsibilities of Local-Self bodies**

Wards have been given a variety of functions and duties which relate to the removal of waste and sewage, maintaining canals, drains and dams; assistance in managing health centers, schools; and project supervision. The functions and duties of VDCs are much wider. VDCs have been envisaged to carry out agricultural development; arrange for bazaars, veterinary services and

animal disease control; provide drinking water; build and maintain rural roads and bridges; establish primary schools; supervise and manage schools within the area; provide adult education; irrigation; soil erosion programmes and river control; electricity generation; community buildings; land-utilization plans; operate and maintain health posts; forestation and environmental protection; preservation of tourist sites and religious places; record keeping of population, houses, land and livestock; birth and death registration; works to control natural calamities; control immoral activities; and promote income generation. In terms of social protection, VDCs have the responsibility for the helpless, orphan and disabled children; the upliftment of women within the village; and the protection of girls and women. The VDCs



and Municipalities are also the primary institution responsible for development activities. They should formulate annual development plans, collect objective data and prepare a resource map of the area, undertake feasibility studies, select, monitor and evaluate projects, and coordinate with NGOs. The legal responsibilities of Municipalities include those of VDCs, and extend beyond that commensurate to urban needs and generally higher resource levels.

## 8. Findings of the Study:

### 8.1 Occupation of the Respondents

Category of the Respondents	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Chairman	7	16.7
Secretary	7	16.7
Male UP Member	14	33.3
Female UP Member	7	16.7
Village Police	7	16.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

The table enunciates that among the local administration 7 Chairmen are respondents (16.7% of all), 7 are secretaries (16.7% of all), 14 respondents are male UP Members (33.3% of all), 7 female Up Members (16.7% of all) and 7 village polices (16.7% of all). I have selected them as respondents because of showing the representativeness in my study. As my study areas are seven unions from two Divisions, I studied the people from administration that were proportionately distributed.

### 8.2 Age of the Respondents

Age	Respondents	Percentage
35-39	14	33.3
40-44	21	50.0
45-49	7	16.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

The table exemplifies the age categories of the respondents where I found 33.3% respondents are in age group 35-39; 50% respondents belong in 40-44 age groups; and 16.7% respondents are in the age group of 45-49. Here, I can see that more than half of the respondents are in matured age group that is really needed for these types of position.

### 8.3 Sex of the Respondents

Sex Category	Respondents	Percentage
Male	34	81.0
Female	8	19.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

From the table it is found that among the respondents male are the most dominant, Which contains 81% and only 19% are female. As I have taken seven Union Parishads from two Divisions, it quite natural that the number of female respondents would be 7.

### 8.4 Occupation of the Respondents

Occupation	Respondents	Percentage
Businessman	6	14.3
Teacher	6	14.3
Small businessman	10	23.8
Carpenter	3	7.1
Farmer	14	33.3
Housewife	3	7.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

The table demonstrates that majority of the respondents are farmer and businessman considering 33.3% and 23.8% individually. Teacher and small businessman contain the similar percentage of 14.3, and only 7.1% respondents are carpenter and housewives respectively.

### 8.5 Education level of the Respondents

Education level	Respondents	Percentage
Primary	21	50.0
SSC	10	23.8
HSC	3	7.1
B.A.	4	9.5
M.A.	4	9.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

As per education level, the table delve into that 50% respondents are in primary level; 23.8% are in SSC level. Respondents with the education level HSC contain 7.1% and only 9.5% respondents have B.A and M.A. level of education. The literacy status is not satisfactory at all.

### 8.6 Monthly Income of the Respondents

Monthly Income	Respondents	Percentage
1500-1999	4	9.5
2000-2499	5	11.9
2500-2999	3	7.1
3000-3499	10	23.8
3500-4999	8	19.0
5000-6999	5	11.9
7000+	7	16.7
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

From the table I found that, highest percentage (23.8%) of the respondents' monthly income in between Tk. 300-3499. Respondents with monthly income Tk.1500-1999 are 9.5%. 11.9% respondents have the similar income level i.e. Tk. 200-2499. Only 7.1% respondents have the income level up to Tk. 3000 and the highest income level (7000+) respondents are about 17%.

### 8.7 What type of duties you carry out for the government and people?

(Multiple response)

Duties to govt. and people	Respondents	Percentage
VGF Card distribution	40	95.2
VGD Card distribution	41	97.6
Sanitation Improvement	27	64.3
Child marriage prevention	23	54.8
Road-Culvert construction	31	73.8
Illiteracy eradication	35	83.3
Consciousness about education	39	92.9
Health consciousness	40	95.2
Awareness against dowry	29	69.0
Agriculture improvement	26	61.9
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

This table is composed to multiple responses of the respondents regarding the duties toward government and people. Among the respondents 95% are involve in VGF card distribution and health consciousness program. Some respondents (83% and 93% respectively) said that they worked on illiteracy eradication and consciousness about education as their administrative and moral duties. 98% are involved with VGD card distribution, 64% are involved in sanitation improvements; and 69% and 62% are taking the duties about making awareness against dowry as well as in agriculture improvements respectively. The percentage of the respondents engaged in child marriage prevention is (55%) and road-culvert construction (74%).

### 8.8 What kind of problem you face to do the work in your locality?

(Multiple response)

Types of problem	Respondents	Percentage
Pressure of local MP	26	61.9
Non-cooperation of local administration	16	38.1
Inadequate manpower	31	73.8
Non-cooperation of people	17	40.5

Local Terrorism	13	31.0
Insufficient amount of Budget	40	95.2
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

From the table it is seen that pressure of local MP, inadequate manpower and insufficient amount of budget are largely responsible to create a problem to do the work in their locality, which contains 95%, 74% and 62% respectively. 38% respondents said that non-cooperation of local administration create problem for their work. Other responses like non-cooperation of people, local terrorism contain lower percentage, but it is significant for this study to get a full-fledged idea.

#### 8.9 Do you have access to all facilities given by the government?

Access to all facilities	Respondents	Percentage
Yes	19	45.2
No	23	54.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

Table described that among the all respondents, 55% have no access to all facilities whereas 45% have access to all facilities. But the question is why most of the respondents said they did not get the all facilities- the answer regarding this question is very vivid to all. They said it for the nepotism and corruption.

#### 8.10 What kind of success you already have achieved during your period?

(Multiple response)

Types of Success	Respondents	Respondents
Child marriage prevention	29	69.0
Education awareness	17	40.5
Health awareness	36	85.7
Awareness about Dowry	40	95.2
Agriculture improvement	26	61.9

Ensure safe drinking water and sanitation	33	78.6
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

The table provides that 95% respondents achieved success to create awareness against dowry and 85% respondents are capable to make the awareness about health. 41% and 62% of the respondents achieved to create the awareness about education and agricultural development respectively. 79% respondents achieved the success regarding to provide safe drinking water and sanitation, and 69% achieved the prestige of preventing the child marriage.

### 8.11 What kind of failure you face in your duties?

(Multiple response)

Causes of failure	Respondents	Respondents
Fail to modernize agriculture	19	45.2
Fail to mitigate factionalism	26	61.9
Fail to root out terrorism	16	38.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>42</b>	<b>100</b>

**Source:** Field Study, June--November, 2014

It is observed that, 38% respondents think they fail to root out terrorism, 62% think they fail to mitigate factionalism and 45% think they fail to modernize agriculture. I think they are mainly fail because of non-cooperation and mismanagement. When people ask for help to them they just avoid the incidence by claiming that they are unable to do the work for them.

## 9. The Problems and Prospects of Local Government

But the system of local self—government particularly in rural Bangladesh has yet to be built on a sound footing because of the following perennial problems:

- The local government (LG) structure is primarily a colonial legacy. Introduced first by the British, it passed through the Pakistan period to independent Bangladesh. During the British and Pakistan period the experience of LG was within a federal framework whereas during independent Bangladesh it is operating under unitary system.

- Though the structure of national political government has undergone transformation from despotic to democratic, the local government in Bangladesh has not undergone through any basic revision or transformation to suit unitary governmental structure. The legal constitutional basis of local government has remained virtually unaffected.
- The local government suffers from considerable inconsistency in respect of chartered functions, seemingly varied and multifarious, prescribed in the statutes. But in reality, the functions have been restricted to few and those that are dictated by, the central government.
- The local government bodies do not have enough own sources of income, hence they lacking local resource mobilization and become wholly dependent on government grants.
- Repeated disruptions in political process halted national constitutional growth thereby disturbing constitutional base of local government.
- Again, occasional switchover to non-political military rule increased political dependence on central government upon the local governments for legitimacy and conversely tied local government with central government in financial dependency.

## **10. Recommendations**

The experiences of field study give me some ideas to make a recommendation list about the existing structures, functions and problems of local government system in Bangladesh.

The specific recommendations are:

- Local government system should be fully autonomous;
- To circulate all rules and regulations and all functions and problems need to be known to all people and local administration;
- A good relation is inevitable between central and local government;
- It is mandatory to make a data base on poor and disadvantage people in order to make proper distribution of all facilities and rights;
- More participation of the people in local government activities.

## **11. Conclusion**

Here, I would like to say that the existing local government bodies are not able to ensure the welfare of village community because development role of local government at local level is

marginal; as is lack of consistency in their pattern and functioning. Functionally as well as structurally a number of mutually inconsistent patterns are operating in the country. Simultaneously, search for and experimentation with newer patterns has not yet ceased. No national consensus has apparently emerged. The local government as a national sub-system is yet to settle down. What still remains basically an offshoot of colonial and federal tradition has to be boldly restructured consistent to the overall governmental superstructure of a unitary state as well as to the requirement of an independent and developing country. This would call for a clearly laid out policy with regard to the structure, functions, finance, management, center-local-relationship and many other things.

The various problems relating to the local government system which I found in my study are: undue bureaucratic control, blatant interference of MPs, exclusionary participation of women, financial disempowerment compromising the viability of local bodies, lack of mobilization of local resources, lack of financial devolution, concentration of powers and authorities, proposals to further empower MPs, too many laws and circulars which are meaningless and contradictory, lack of skills, competence and widespread corruption.

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