

Full Length Research Paper

Union Parishad (UP) election and communities view: a micro-level study in rural Bangladesh

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Union Parishad (council) is the grass-root institution in rural Bangladesh. It is popularly termed as 'Board Office' by old rural people. This institution, representatives are elected by people, has contribution for development of rural communities since long. Last election was held in 2003. Its tenure expired in 2008. However, Election Commission (EC) of Bangladesh recently completed election of majority of Union Parishad (UP). It was found that 71.25% votes were cast in the study area. Voters enthusiastically went at polling center with festive mood. But facts and figures indicated that people had low participation in previous Union Parishad (UP)-led development activities. There was no participatory plan with long-term vision. It was revealed that despite weaknesses local people, especially youths, had positive attitude on elected representatives and interested to be involved in development process for bright and promising future. Open ward meeting, that is, institutional innovation can be fruitful platform for development and good governance. Local people urged that union based Five Year Plan (2011-2015) should be prepared immediately in the light of local priorities and strategic goals of national plan and MDGs.

Key words: Development plan, Election, Good governance, Participation, Union Parishad, Ward meeting, Well-beings.

Introduction

In Bangladesh, Union Parishad (UP) is the grass-root institution for integrating local people into development process. An effective and efficient pro-people Union Parishad (UP) can contribute to improve well-beings of citizen. This article is based on Union Parishad (UP) election that held in 2011 in Bangladesh. Based on primary research done by the author, this article highlights pre, during, and post election environment in the selected Union Parishad (UP). It portrays comparative picture between voter attendance and real scenario of people's access, their participation, and decision making process in Union Parishad (UP)-led development activities. This article also insights on observation of respondents about functions of Union

Parishad (UP) representatives. Finally, it explores biographic characteristics of contesters & winners, expectation and suggestive measures of people which can be useful findings for politicians, policy makers, development practitioners, and others.

Bangladesh and local government system

Geographic area of Bangladesh is 147,570 square kilometers. Total population of Bangladesh was 123.85 million in 2001 (BBS 2001). As per UNFPA, population of Bangladesh was 164.4 million in 2010 (UNFPA 2010). According to the provisional results of 2011 Population and Housing Census, the enumerated population on 15th

March 2011 was 142,319,000 (BBS 2011). Bangladesh is predominantly an agricultural country. Gross National Income (GNI) is US\$ 645 in 2010 (WB 2010). 01 US\$ is equivalent to BDT 73.85 (as on 16 June 2011, Bangladesh Bank). Bangladesh ranked 129th, out of 169 countries, of the UN Human Development Index and has been improving over the last decade (HDR 2010).

The present structure of local government in Bangladesh had its origin in British colonial period. The first attempt at establishing local government institution was made during the latter part of the nineteenth century. The structure, functions, and financial management of local government institutions have undergone many changes from the British colonial period to the present day. It is recorded in history that the villages were self reliant before the colonial rule. Every village had its own community based organization known as *Panchayet* (village council). All the adult members of the village society constituted it. Apart from taking decisions in social matters adjudication in disputes and maintenance of law and order were among its responsibilities. The *Panchayets* used to mobilize resources for the discharge of their traditional functions. The *Panchayet* evolved naturally out of the social needs and was based on public opinion. There was no legal basis or authority behind them. During the British rule the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act was passed in 1870 with administrative, economic, and political objectives. This paved the way for setting up local government body under the law. Under this act several villages were organized into a union and Chowkidari *Panchayet* was set up in each union (LGD 2011). There are a number of literatures available on historical background of local government. So, this article does not insight on its history. However, at present Union Parishad (UP), *Pourashava* (municipality), *Upazila* (sub-district) Parishad, and City Corporation are elected local government body.

Union Parishad (UP)

Union Parishad (UP) is constituted of 01 chairman and 12 members. Among the 12 members, 03 seats are reserved for women. Each union is divided into 09 wards and each ward has 01 member elected directly by the people's votes. One woman member for the reserved seats is elected by the voters of every 03 wards. The structure, power, and functions of the Union Parishad (UP) in Bangladesh have been changed many times since its inception.

The Local Government (Union Parishad) (Amendment) Act, 2010 was approved on 11 October 2010. It is regarding realignment of population of ward and stated that population of one ward from other ward is not 10 percent more or less. However, enacted Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 added a few new dimensions which are important for local governance and local development. These are formation of ward committee, ward meetings, participatory budget, placing

of budgets in public meetings, and planning. At present, total number of Union Parishad (UP) is around 4,505 in Bangladesh. Last Union Parishad (UP) election was held in 2003. Its tenure expired in 2008. Election Commission (EC) of Bangladesh arranged election of 4,303 Union Parishad (UP) at two phases from 29 March 2011 to 07 July 2011 (Prothom Alo 2011).

Study area

This study has been conducted in 15 no. Wahedpur Union of Mirshari sub-district under Chittagong district. Geographical coverage is 7.37 square kilometers comprising 13 villages. Total number of households is 4,439. Total population is 24,463; Male-11,969, Female-12,494 in 2009 (LCG 2011). Number of voters is 15,833; Men-7,595, Women-8,238 (Sub-district election office, Mirshari, personal communication). It is found through social mapping that there are 01 college, 03 high schools, 13 government and registered primary schools, 01 orphan house, 05 markets, 04 banks, 36 mosques, 08 temples, and other social institutions. There are also holly and historical places in this union. The union is approximately five kilometers far from and at the south side of Mirshari sub-district. Dhaka-Chittagong highway and railroad are passed across this union. So, it could not be considered as a remote union in Bangladesh.

Methodology

The fieldwork for this research has been carried out during June 2011, that is, pre and post periods of election in Wahedpur Union Parishad (UP). The election was held on 07 June 2011. From each ward, 4.00% of total voters were selected randomly from voter list. Total 43 respondents were not found due to death, relocation to city and abroad (mainly Middle East), and reluctance as well. Finally, total 590 respondents, out of total 15,833 voters, have been surveyed with questionnaire. Focus Group Discussion (FGD) has been facilitated with the participation of youths, adolescent girls and boys, professional groups, local leaders, teachers, religious mentors, journalists, and members of civil society. Filled-up nomination forms of candidates have also been examined for facts and figures. The main methods used in this research were observation of respondents, FGD, and complemented with semi-structured interviewing from the community people.

Major findings

Election environment

Undoubtedly, election was free and fair in the study area. There was voter list with photos of voters; thus no chance of fake voting. People, especially aged, told that it was a far much better and improved scenario from 2003, 1997, and 1992 election. Candidates did not arrange big procession and gathering rather they went to voters from door to door. They used black & white poster and careful about size, content, portrait, and pixel of photo, poster, banner, and symbol as prescribed by Election Commission (EC). Volunteers and activists of candidates hanged poster by rope rather than pasted in public places. Nobody

demonstrated big dummy of election symbol. Candidate established and used only one camp or office for campaign and even some candidates did not establish any camp or office. Candidates strictly maintained time schedule during publicity through mike or microphone. Supporters of rival candidates accepted election result. There was no incidence of turbulence after election. However, in few cases code of conduct was not properly followed. As example, some candidates provided rickshaw for voters to go at polling center. Tea, cookies, betel leaf, and cigarette were catered to voters at camp. On the whole, election environment was good. It was simple but festive mood in the study area. However, it was reported that total 160 people died due to election clashes in 2003 (DEMOCRACYWATCH 2003). It was also reported that total 43 people died due to election clashes in 2011 (Prothom Alo 2011).

Voting and participation

The term participation is generally defined differently depending on the context and field in which it is studied. In ancient Greece participation was viewed as a matter of voting, holding offices, attending public meetings, paying taxes and defending the state (Samad 2002). But in modern times participation became synonymous of 'sharing' (Kaler 1999). Cohen and Uphoff (1980) viewed participation with regard to development projects as "people's involvement in decision making processes, in implementing program, their sharing in the benefits of development programs" and their involvement in efforts to evaluate such program. In this work, participation refers to active or meaningful involvement of local people in Union Parishad (UP)-led development activities in Bangladesh.

Considering counted votes of chairman candidates, total 71.25% votes were cast. It is remarkable to disclose that total 233 votes were not counted due to inappropriate sealing on ballot paper by voters. Locally it is called 'rotten of vote'. However, presence of voters proves remarkable and enthusiastic participation to elect Union Parishad (UP) representatives.

As regard to questionnaire, a section that endeavored to assess access, decision making, and affiliation of people with Union Parishad (UP). It was known through survey that 28.80% of female respondents do not know the location of Union Parishad (UP). They did not ever see Union Parishad (UP) office. Out of 316 female respondents, 182 never went to Union Parishad (UP). Similarly, total 19 out of 274 male respondents did not go to Union Parishad (UP). Most of them managed birth certificate, character certificate, and other facilities by their relatives or well-wishers. Percentage of access of male and female respondents is depicted in chart 1.

There were 13 standing committees for effective and efficient functioning of Union Parishad (UP). Those committees were formed every financial year as lawful

procedure. Committees were: 1) Finance and Establishment Committee; 2) Audit and Accounts Committee; 3) Law and Order Committee; 4) Agriculture and Other Development Works Committee; 5) Fisheries and Livestock Committee; 6) Health, Family Planning and Epidemic Control Committee; 7) Education and Mass Education Committee; 8) Union Public Works Committee; 9) Committee for Welfare of Women and Children, Sports and Culture; 10) Rural Water Supply and Sanitation Committee; 11) Committee for Conservation of the Environment and Tree Plantation; 12) Social Welfare and Community Centers Committee; 13) Cottage Industries and Cooperatives Committee. However, 88.81% of total respondents said that they did not know about functions of standing committees. Some respondents told that they did not ever hear name of such standing committees. Only 11.19% of total respondents mentioned that they know about activities of standing committees. They informed that Education and Mass Education Committee was more active for ensuring attendance of students and teachers in school and reducing drop out of students.

It is significant to note that representatives of 15 no. Wahedpur Union Parishad (UP) published its program activities and budget of financial year 2009-2010. Regional Fisheries and Livestock Development Component (RFLDC), GoB-DANIDA, supported to publish that bulletin. Names of members of standing committees and their responsibilities, major achievements, and budget details are described in the bulletin. Total 17 projects amounted Taka 927,400 were implemented in 2008-2009 under financial support of Local Governance Support Project (LGSP). Total budget was Taka 2,864,668 in financial year 2009-2010. However, 91.86% of total respondents do not have any idea about budget and its preparation process. Total 9.59% of them alleged that they wanted to know about budget but failed. 17.12% of total respondents informed that they were involved in opinion sharing, planning, and implementation of projects. Majority of respondents were reluctant to provide any information about tax payment.

Functions of representatives

There were 10 mandatory functions and 38 optional functions of Union Parishad (UP). Those functions can be classified in broad categories; like social functions, law and defense functions, administrative functions, and development functions. However, present act has revised its functions and added some new aspects which are significant for local governance and development. Respondents were asked to provide open ended answer about functions of Union Parishad (UP) and to rank functions that usually implemented by its representatives. It was recognized that they have moderate knowledge about functions of an ideal Union Parishad (UP). Observation of respondents about involvement and more visualized functions of Union Parishad (UP) representa-

Table 1: Observation of respondents about functions of Union Parishad (UP) representatives

Functions	Rank
Construction and maintenance of roads, bridges, and culverts	1
To attend and play role in local <i>shalish</i> (arbitration)	2
Distribution of Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) / Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards and allowances to disadvantaged households. Implementation of Food for Works Program (FFWP), in Bengali, <i>kabikha</i>	3
To attend at social program, gathering, and festival	4
Birth registration and certificates issue	5
To visit educational institutions	6
Distribution of ring slab for sanitary latrine	7
To facilitate for conducting households survey	8
Improving health services	9

Note: 1= Top priority, 2= Second priority, 3= Third priority

tives are given in table 1.

Contesters and winners

Total 05 candidates contested for chairman post. A total of 30 candidates contested for member post and 06 women for reserved seats. Biographic characteristics of contesters and winners are given in table 2.

Woman and man have equal rights to contest for chairman and member post but no woman contested with man for those posts. Total 06 women contested only for 03 reserved seats which shows gray picture of women representation in the election. Women candidates and winners are comparatively younger than men. Here business is a dominated occupational category. Occupation of 45.71% of male candidates is business and 80.00% of male winners come from same occupation. Few candidates were not able to articulate nature of their business properly. Their business is not also visualized to people. Most of the women candidates are housewife. Monthly income of majority of winners, especially men, is higher than the others. Educational qualification of elected chairman is post-graduate and members from different categories.

Bangladesh Awami League and Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) are two major political parties in Bangladesh. The Election Commission (EC) ordered to avoid use of political party name, politician name, and political photo. All candidates followed the order of Election Commission (EC). The Election Commission (EC) advised Members of Parliament (MPs) to refrain from indulging in activities creating a climate of confusion in violation of election

conduct rules. Before election, 76.27% of total respondents opined that general voters will not vote under any political party consideration. Respondents told that nature of local election is different from Member of Parliament (MP) election. However, elected chairman obtained 5,973 votes and his nearest competitor obtained 5,081 votes. They are prominent political personality of two major political wings.

People's expectation

A synopsis paper was prepared based on survey findings, election environment, voter attendance, biographic characteristics of winners, and real picture of participation of people in Union Parishad (UP)-led development activities. Key findings were: 71.25% votes were cast in election that held on 07 June 2011; low (17.12%) involvement of people in Union Parishad (UP)-led implemented projects; most of the respondents (88.81%) did not know about standing committees; low level (8.14%) knowledge about budget; and very low tax payment by people. After election, information of synopsis paper was shared with FGD participants. They were sensitized after sharing information. Participants, especially old, told that once we voluntarily constructed road, bamboo-made culvert, and excavated canal. We usually implemented those work at night with enjoyment and cooking local vermicelli, sweet pie and so on. We cultivated fish in *para* (neighborhoods) based ponds. Collective approach was our main motto. Day by day, such initiatives are being vanished from our society. Now we look at central government through local government

Table 2: Biographic characteristics of contesters and winners

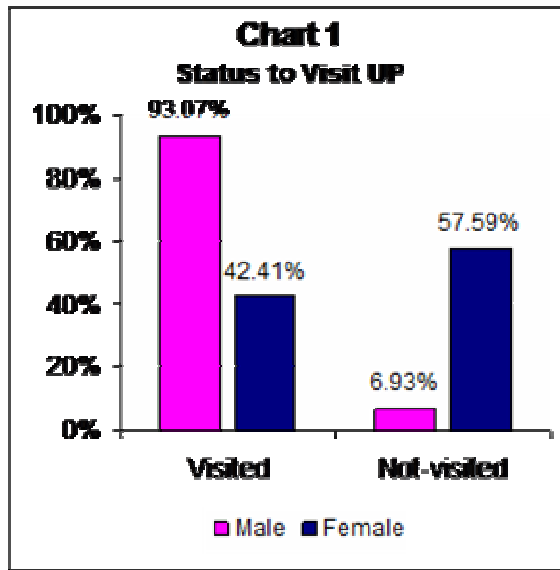
Elements	Particulars	Contesters			Winners		
		C	M	W	C	M	W
Age	From 26 to 30 years	-	2	-	-	-	-
	From 31 to 35 years	-	3	1	-	-	1
	From 36 to 40 years	-	3	1	-	2	1
	From 41 to 45 years	2	6	2	1	2	1
	From 46 to 50 years	3	6	2	-	2	-
	From 51 to 55 years	-	5	-	-	1	-
	Over 55 years	-	5	-	-	2	-
	Total	5	30	6	1	9	3
Education	Illiterate	-	-	-	-	-	-
	Signature knowledge	-	3	-	-	-	-
	Primary school	-	5	-	-	1	-
	High school	-	9	1	-	2	-
	SSC	-	4	2	-	2	1
	HSC	1	5	2	-	3	1
	Graduate	3	4	1	-	1	1
	Post-graduate	1	-	-	1	-	-
	Total	5	30	6	1	9	3
Occupation	Agriculture	-	6	-	-	1	-
	Business	5	11	-	1	7	-
	Private service	-	6	2	-	-	1
	Daily labor	-	1	-	-	-	-
	Local doctor	-	1	-	-	-	-
	Housewife	-	-	4	-	-	2
	Unemployed	-	5	-	-	1	-
	Total	5	30	6	1	9	3
Income	Less than Taka 2,000	-	-	4	-	-	2
	Taka 2,001 to 4,000	-	3	-	-	-	-
	Taka 4,001 to 6,000	1	12	-	-	2	-
	Taka 6,001 to 8,000	1	3	1	-	1	1
	Taka 8,001 to 10,000	1	9	-	1	3	-
	Over Taka 10,000	2	3	1	-	3	-
	Total	5	30	6	1	9	3

Note: C= Chairman, M= Member, W= Women (reserved seats)

for any development intervention.

Youths were inspired from discussion to form voluntary group for doing such development work. In cross-sectional discussion, they identified that construction of new Union Parishad (UP) Complex, irrigation, multi-crops production, tree plantation, and birth registration were major achievements but lack of information dissemination and lack of participatory initiatives generates mistrust and pollutes flavor of achievements. However, it is noteworthy

to describe that attitude of respondents, as regard to questionnaire, was measured before election through asking why candidates inclined to be Union Parishad (UP) representatives. 68.64% of total respondents had positive attitude on candidates. They mentioned that candidates competed for serving people, development of society, social welfare, improving law and order, goodwill, and self-esteem. 31.36% of total respondents had negative attitude on candidates; like for exercising vested interest,



relief embezzlement, and corruption. In same process, it was found that majority of FGD participants had positive attitude to winners of Union Parishad (UP) election. They blamed that a few ill-treated people under political signboard interfere Union Parishad (UP) activities. In some extents, real political leaders are also vulnerable to them. Participants urged to keep such miscreants far away from Union Parishad (UP). Participants also expressed their expectations to recently elected representatives of Union Parishad (UP). Those were: 1) Arrangement of open meeting for identification of local problems and prospects; 2) To prepare cluster based participatory budget; 3) To encourage respective people to pay tax through participatory dialogue, take initiative for legal action, if necessary; 4) To encourage and support youths to form *para* (neighborhoods) based youth group for voluntary work; 5) To prepare list of hardcore poor and disadvantaged person at ward level through participation of people; 6) To take necessary steps to stop nuisance of alcohol addicts; 7) To show information of development project through signboard; 8) To ensure coordination and follow-up of the Government line agencies located at Union Parishad (UP).

Development plan

It was observed that there was no planning document in Union Parishad (UP) with any long-term vision. Before election, candidates usually wanted pray and benediction from people to win in election. They did not have goal-oriented development manifesto. Therefore, participants of FGD urged that it is right time to prepare result based participatory plan. They viewed that ward meeting can be strong institutional platform to prepare union based Five Year Plan (2011-2015). This platform can be fruitfully utilized to implement yearly plan, review progress, budget

preparation, inclusion of disadvantaged people, campaign, and transparency & accountability. It is significant to state that the enacted Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 has credential to incorporate importance of ward meeting, its formation procedure, and functions for ensuring service delivery, development, and good governance. There are 13 standing committees in Union Parishad (UP) as before. But name and functions of previous standing committees have been revised and merged. Emergence issues like tax assessment and collection, birth-death registration, disaster management, and so on have been addressed.

The Government of Bangladesh recently approved BANGLADESH SIXTH FIVE YEAR PLAN: FY2011-FY2015. Bangladesh has gradually progressed with development despite numerous internal and external constraints. The Government recognizes that Bangladesh is still a low income country with substantial poverty, inequality, and deprivation. An estimated 60 million people are living below the poverty line with a significant proportion living in households which are female headed, in remote areas, and consisting of socially excluded and other vulnerable people. Union Parishad (UP) has myriad role to achieve targets of Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-2015), MDGs, and Vision 2021 of Bangladesh. In Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-2015), the Government is committed for capacity enhancement and promoting devolution of local government institutions. The Government also considers expanding the scope of Public-Private Partnership (PPP) in the social sector. Such dimension should be incorporated in knowledge development packages for Union Parishad (UP) representatives and staffs. Issues and concerns like adaptation to climate change; Information and Communication Technology (ICT); e-governance; responsibilities for implementing programs to reduce

regional disparity within Bangladesh should be progressively reflected and practiced.

Conclusion

This study concludes with some learning and suggestive measures for bright and promising future. Though people had low involvement in Union Parishad (UP)-led development activities but they enthusiastically vote in recent election. Majority of community people have positive attitude and trust to elected representatives. They want to be involved in development process. Ward meeting, that is, institutional novelty can be one of the instruments for development and good governance. We should note that the end of the Sixth Five Year Plan (2011-2015) coincides with the terminal year for the MDGs (2015). Thus, it is right time to prepare union based Five Year Plan (2011-2015) in the light of local priorities and strategic goals of national plan and MDGs.

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