

DEVELOPMENT OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH

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Introduction:

Bangladesh emerged as an independent country in 1971 through a bloody war of liberation. Within the greater Himalayan subcontinent she shared her long history with India and Pakistan till the end of British rule in 1947. Between 1947 and 1971 Bangladesh was part of Pakistan with autonomous provincial status. It was then known first as East Bengal and then as East Pakistan.

Because of the common history, Bangladesh shares her experiences in many areas with India and Pakistan. Local government is one such area where the history of centuries gives a commonality of the character of related institutions in the three countries. Therefore, much of the history of development of local government in Bangladesh manifests an identical pattern as in India and Pakistan. It is essential that this particular background is kept in view while appreciating the development of local government in Bangladesh.

The country is relatively small geographical entity with an area of 55,000 Sq. miles. But a population of about 100 million makes her one of the bigger countries in the world. The government of the country is unitary though during the British (up to 1947) and Pakistan (1947-71) periods it experienced a federal form of government.

The country is divided into four principal regions known as "division". The divisions are divided into districts, presently 65 of them, and the districts into Upazilas (sub-districts) of which there are 460. The sub-districts are again divided into 4,400 unions and the unions into about 68,000 villages.

Local Government units at present exist at the Union and Upazila levels mainly. There is a tier at the district level, but it is in a moribund condition. The local government units are known as "parishads" or councils and the unit at the Upazila level is currently the most important tier of local government in the country.

In this paper, we have made an attempt to trace the growth and development of local government in Bangladesh in the historical perspective. The paper is divided into four parts corresponding to the four distinct periods of history; part one deals with the ancient and medieval periods, part two with the British period and part three with the period under Pakistan rule. The development during the period of independent Bangladesh (1971 till date) have been discussed in part four. The paper has been concluded with some observations on the future trends and prospects of local government in Bangladesh.

Ancient and medieval periods

Though modern local government system in the subcontinent was introduced by the British, local self government was widespread during ancient and medieval periods. Various literature indicate the existence of formal institutions in the rural as well as urban areas. One feature of the local bodies of medieval and ancient periods was that the control exercised by the central government was less and the affairs which fell within the jurisdiction of these authorities were far more numerous.

British author Sir Charles Metcalfe described the Indian villages as "little republics" to signify their self-sufficient character. These village authorities used to undertake all such functions as defence, preservation of order, punishment of crime, settlement of disputes, management of communal lands, collection of revenue on behalf of the state, supervision of endowments for religious, medical and other charitable purposes, conduct of banking business, provision of burial etc. Thus, practically all governmental work within the village was in their hands.

The economic condition of the periods primarily preconditioned growth of powerful village communities as distinctive local bodies. There were no good and rapid means of transport and communication. Roads were few and the arm of the state could not reach the villages to any effective degree. The villages had therefore to be left to themselves. Isolation compelled each village to become completely self-sufficient. A kind of total community participation was built in within these rural local governments during the ancient and medieval periods.

The village life was both isolated and vulnerable. Country by-roads were non-existent. Each village was isolated-often separated from neighbouring hamlets, by jungles or waste land. Village life was a little world of its own; village society made its own laws and took its own decisions.

The age old village local government system in the subcontinent underwent a change roughly in the period between 1750 and 1850, the period of anarchy following the collapse of the Mughal empire and the establishment and consolidation of British rule. The process of disintegration began with the growth in the means of communication-metalled roads and railways put an end to the isolation of villages and to their self-sufficiency.

Compared to the villages, urban communities were few. The few genuine urban communities grew out of political and religious necessity. These urban communities were mostly official and administrative rather than commercial and bourgeois.

British period (1765-1947)

The East India Company during its earliest days encouraged its servants to form little settlements in the town-centres side by side with Indian suburbs, known as "white towns". These towns were granted charters setting up municipal bodies, first in 1688 and then in 1726. Following the tradition of these municipal organizations, the first formal measure of municipal organization in the then Bengal Presidency was introduced in 1842 under Act X which provided for setting up of town Committees for sanitary services. But none of these measures had any impact in the area now constituting Bangladesh. However, by the Act XXVI of 1850, municipalities were set up for the first time in five towns of Bangladesh, namely, Nasirabad (1856), Sherpore (1861), Dhaka (1864), Chittagong (1864), Brahmanbaria (1868).

In the rural areas the company was guided solely by the consideration of revenue collection. The company introduced repeated changes in the land tenure system which culminated in the permanent settlement (1793) and creation of a new class of landlords. Thereby the village society was subordinated permanently to landlord rule. Activities of the landlords dealt a death blow to the already decaying corporate life of village communities. On the other hand, a centralized system of administration was introduced during this period. Under the Bengal Districts Act of 1836, the rural area was divided and districts were created. District Magistrates were placed in control of these districts with very wide ranging powers. The District Magistrates, among other things, were entrusted with "local funds" for the upkeep of local roads and bridges. By 1850, District Committees, headed by District Magistrates were set up to manage these local funds. Thus, up to the middle of nineteenth century the British rule had made virtually no mark on the towns and the villages of Bangladesh in the sphere of local government. The appearance of the country remained largely the same as it had been a hundred years ago.

From the time of Lord Dalhousie (1848-1857) trunk roads and railways spanned the country, mail post came to the village, government officials like the school inspector, the vaccinator, the agriculture expert appeared. Gradually the closed village economy succumbed to modernization.

In 1857 the British rule in the subcontinent faced a bloody revolt which resulted into serious financial problems for the company. One of the remedies considered to overcome the situation was financial decentralization, seeking to transfer responsibility for roads and public works to local bodies, viz the municipal institutions. There were encouraging results

which led to liberalization of attitude of the British Government as was reflected in the Resolution issued in 1864. As an immediate consequence, the Bengal Municipal Act of 1864 was enacted and every town of importance became a municipality. But elective principles were not allowed in these bodies. The District Magistrate formed the Boards from among the respectable citizens of the locality.

During this period local government in the villages also gained some impetus. Bengal District Committee Act of 1871 allowed formation of District Committee under the presidency of the District Magistrate, which in effect was nothing more than a convenience for the District Magistrate. The funds available were so meagre that no proper public services were possible by these District Committees. Village life was hardly touched by the new District Committees.

There was however an attempt for a smaller unit of local government at the village level. In 1870 the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act was enacted. Under this Act the country-side was divided into "Unions" comprising about ten to twelve square miles. These unions were placed under "Panchayats" which raised funds for the "chowkidars" or village police. These so called "Panchayats" had only a formal existence, and were popularly regarded not as the representatives of the village people, but as servants of the 'Sarkar' or the Government.

Thus by 1881 though a framework of local government was in existence, both in town and in the villages the principles of local self-government was not put into practice. The control was firmly in the hands of the officials of the government.

The subsequent period from 1882 to 1907 witnessed a number of attempts to reform the local government system in the subcontinent, spear-headed by Lord Ripon, a liberal Viceroy. Lord Ripon's famous Resolution on local self-government of 18 May, 1882 laid down certain principles which influenced greatly the thinking on politics and local government for over three subsequent decades. These principles were; (i) political education is the primary function of local government and is of greater importance than administrative efficiency; (ii) rural local boards are to be set up, similiar to municipal boards; (iii) all boards should contain a two-third majority of non-officials — these should be elected whenever possible; (iv) election should begin immediately in more progressive towns, to be followed gradually and by informal experimentation methods, in smaller towns and the countryside; (v) control should be exercised from without rather than within; (vi) the chairman of all local boards should be non-officials whenever possible.

It is ironical that the liberal views of Lord Ripon did not find favour with the British authorities of the time. The subsequent Resolutions and the Bengal Municipal Act of 1883 which followed Ripon's Resolution, strongly favoured continuation of official control over the local Boards

with the District Magistrate acting as the chairman. However, in the towns, increasingly large number of municipalities came to have non-officials as chairmen. But the chairmen of rural bodies were almost all officials. The district boards were presided over by the District Magistrates as the unchallenged head of rural affairs. However, gradually the non-officials were accepted to occupy majority positions in both rural and urban boards. By 1890 in most towns, administration by an elected committee came to be accepted as natural form of municipal government.

The most remarkable development that took place as a consequence of Lord Ripon's Resolution of 1882, was the establishment of a net work of rural local bodies-six years before there were any rural councils in England itself. As a result under the Bengal Local Self-Government Act, 1885 a 'two tier' system of local boards-district boards and local (sub-district) boards came to be set up. The district boards replaced the district committees set up during 1850s.

Ripon's Resolution envisaged the district boards as a supervising or co-ordinating authority over the local boards, the later being the principal local body. But in practice, the district boards were entrusted with all the funds and almost all the functions of local government. Subsequent enactments provided for the delegation of fund and powers to the smaller bodies — at the discretion of district boards. As a result local boards could not make much headway and had only nominal existence.

Though Lord Ripon's Resolution laid great emphasis on the need to raise the superstructure of local government upon the ancient foundation of the village system, in practice rural local government was imposed from above. The villages were practically ignored in the new scheme of rural organization and the resources of district boards were too slender to link the villages with roads or to provide health facilities.

The Bengal Local Self-Government Act of 1885 provided for creation of union committees combining neighbouring villages for sanitary and other services. But the Act did not have much effect in this respect. Not many union committees could actually be set up upto 1914.

The post-Ripon period stretching upto 1907 saw only marginal development either by way of carrying forward the principles of Ripon or acting contrary to it. A new dimension was however added to the local government by the Indian Council Act of 1892 under which the elected members of local government acted as electoral college to choose representatives to the legislature. But government control over the local government continued to increase thorough creation of new bureaucratic departments for public works, education, sanitation, agriculture etc. All these departments came to have a say in local government affairs and a rigid system of supervision was created which spread upto the smallest municipality and the local board. The officials could not reconcile to the growing domination of non-officials in the local government bodies. In the name of a uni-

form policy of development, the need for centralized control was insisted upon. As a result, local self government received only routine attention. More attention was paid to improvement of efficiency of administration.

The government of India set up in 1907 a "Decentralization Commission" to enquire primarily into the financial and administrative aspects of the government and to report whether by decentralization or otherwise the system of government might be improved. The terms of reference of the Commission also included a review of development of local government as an aspect of administrative devolution. The Commission submitted its report in 1909.

Following the report of the Decentralization Commission, isolated attempts were made to improve the situation of local bodies in the line of the proposals of the Commission. In the six years between 1909-15, by a series of piecemeal measures, the pace of local government was set by official policy.

During this period a consciousness of the strength of popular action was gradually spreading. The municipal autonomy expanded and strengthened. For example, in 1913 appointment of health officer was made obligatory in large towns, while sanitary inspection was compulsory for smaller towns.

During the period of first World War the local government generally suffered a set back for financial constraints. But the municipalities were emancipated further during this period. More and more municipalities became free to have elected chairman. But the rural boards continued under the official control.

In August 1917, the British Government made a declaration promising responsible government in India through gradual development of self-governing institutions. In furtherance of the declaration a Resolution was issued in May 1918. The Resolution stipulated that both rural and urban local bodies would contain a majority of elected members and nominated members would not exceed a quarter of the total and the franchise was extended to include rate payers. Non-official chairman for district boards was also promoted. There was an urge to abdicate official leadership and strengthening of the board's executive. The government control over the board was also relaxed.

In 1918, under the Montagu-Chelmsford Report the government decided to substitute election by the general public on an enlarged franchise, for the existing method of election to the legislature through local bodies as electoral college. This measure dealt a heavy blow at the local government in as much as it encouraged public minded politicians from local bodies, who now concentrated their efforts on campaigning in villages and bazaars, to win over the new electorate.

On the basis of Montagu-Chelmsford Report issued in July 1918, the provinces were made autonomous in respect of all fundamental changes in

the law. The provincial legislative councils in future, were to be autonomous in respect of 'nation building subjects'.

The Village Self-Government Act of 1919 came with the most complete rural authorities in Bengal. Under this Act a Union Board was established for an area of about four square miles and a population of about 8,000 in place of old Union Committees. Boards were two-thirds elected by males paying local cesses, and the remainders were nominated. The functions of the Union Boards included maintenance of village police - 'dafadars' and 'chowkidars', upkeep of schools, roads and ponds and the provision of elementary sanitary and medical services. Selected members of the boards might also be formed into judicial benches to try petty criminal and civil cases. In all matters the Union Boards were to act under the supervision and with the advice of the Circle Officers as representatives of District Magistrates. By 1921 large number of Union Boards were formed. On the other hand during this period greater majority of municipal boards were popular non-official bodies and freed from the control of District Magistrate.

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s popular control over the local bodies continued, but growing nationalist politics along party line made the local bodies a hot bed of politics. Local government virtually became subordinate to national politics. Side by side, communal influences also manifested stronger than ever. With education and consciousness growing the Muslim population started asserting themselves for their share in the local bodies which were so long Hindu monopoly. Also, extended franchise made a great difference in the position. By 1937, muslim majorities were clearly established in most of the districts. An important feature was the worsening situation in sub-district or local boards. However, much preferred and commended by successive commissions and government resolutions as the best unit for rural administration they had never achieved much vitality simply because of an elaborate structure of boards and areas to administer. Moreover, a three tier (union-local-district) system of local government split the local revenues to an obvious absurdity. Thus, as a result of representation by their respective district boards, local boards were abolished by Village Self-Government (Amendment) Act of 1937.

The closing years of 1930s and the first half of 1940s was the period of second World War in which the British Government was involved directly. Consequently, during this period the situation in local governments did not have witness any development worth the name. The British rule ended on 14th August, 1947. By that time, the local government was quite well organized in Bengal, both in urban and rural areas, though in many ways, instead of serving as the school of political education, local government became a mere annexe to the national 'political stadium', where the struggle for independence was moving towards its climax.

The period under Pakistan (1947-71):

After 1947, Local Government continued as a provincial subject, and the general structure of local government set up continued. At that time in the territory now forming Bangladesh, local bodies were functioning in the urban and rural areas with the following distribution :—

- (a) District Boards — 15 (one in each district)
- (b) Union boards — 3581
- (c) Municipal boards — 43

The process of gradual development local government was pursued by the provincial government of East Bengal during early years of Pakistan rule. Thus, by the Ordinance No. 1 of 1956 nomination to District boards were abolished and by a decision of the cabinet adult franchise was introduced in all local bodies. The system of reservation of seats for the minority community was also done away with.

The process of gradual development of local government came to an abrupt halt in 1958 when on October 27, Martial Law was clamped over the country by General Ayub Khan. Open politics on party lines were given a goodbye. All local bodies were suspended and local officers were entrusted with the entire responsibility to discharge functions of local government. Ayub Khan introduced a new system called "Basic Democracy" in 1959 which substantially altered the character of local bodies in respect of election as well as composition.

As local bodies, the Basic Democracies were by no means a novelty in the then East Pakistan. Many of their features were borrowed from the old "panchayats" and the local bodies introduced by the British in pre-1947 Bengal. But they differed from past experiments in as much as for the first time local bodies were integrated from bottom to top into the provincial government set up.

The Basic Democracy councils had multiple functions: Administrative, development, local self-government, and constitutional. They were utilized to decentralize administration, to provide for collaboration between the elected representatives of the people and the appointed higher government officials. They were also utilized to decentralize the planning and coordination of developmental activities at different levels of administration. They were entrusted with a wide variety of local environmental and social service functions. Perhaps most important developmental function entrusted to the Basic democracies was the Rural Works Programme (RWP). The Rural Works Programme was launched to bolster the Basic Democracies in general and also help rural people in a meaningful manner in the administration and development of their local area. The lower tiers of Basic Democracies, particularly, the Union Councils and the Thana Councils were entrusted with planning and implementation of local projects. They were to work as the electoral college for the presidential and elections to the national parliament. Eventually, the political role of the

Basic Democracies assumed greater importance than their administrative and local government functions.

The Basic Democracies were a four tiered set up. At the bottom of the structure was the Union Council (called 'Union Committee' or 'Town Committee' in the towns and cities). Its members were elected on the basis of universal adult franchise on average, one representative for a thousand population. Originally, one-third of its members were nominated by the subdivisional officer (SDO), but this procedure was abolished after the introduction of the 1962 constitution. The members elected a chairman from amongst themselves.

Above the Union Council level was the Thana Council. Its membership consisted of all the chairmen of the Union Councils in the Thana and an equal number of government officials appointed by the deputy commissioner. The Subdivisional officer was the ex-officio chairman of the Thana Council. The circle officer was an ex-officio member and acted as chairman in the absence of sub-divisional officer. The next highest tier was the District Council, in which one half of the members were government officials and the other half were non officials appointed by the deputy commissioner. The deputy commissioner was the chairman of the District Council. Above the District Council was the Divisional Council in which membership followed the same ratio as in the District Council. The commissioner was the ex-officio chairman of the Divisional Council. Basic Democrats were elected for a five-year term. The Basic Democrats were more directly involved than their predecessors in the development affairs of their local areas. They participated in the preparation and execution of local plans, and kept records and accounts of local development projects. By monopolizing electoral rights the Basic Democracies system became the most visible target for the discontent of all alienated groups who looked upon it as the mechanism by which the regime perpetuated itself. Ultimately, therefore, the Basic Democracies not only failed to legitimize the regime but in fact lost their own legitimacy.

Ayub Khan was removed from power by a coup in 1969 by a new military junta headed by General Yahya Khan and with that ended the decade of 'integrated' local government. The new martial law dissolved all the political institutions including local bodies introduced under Basic democracy. It was during this period movement for independent Bangladesh was gaining momentum. In 1970, there was a general election to the national assembly of Pakistan, in which Awami League, a party based wholly in East Pakistan won absolute majority. This meant that political leaders from East Pakistan would form the government at the centre, to the exclusion of politicians of West Pakistan. This position was not acceptable to the politicians and military junta of West Pakistan. Soon political rights were curtailed, the national assembly was not allowed to sit. This accelerated independence movement in East Pakistan. Bloody repres-

sion by the military junta over the common people of East Pakistan followed. On 25th March, 1971 Pakistan army cracked down upon the citizens in East Pakistan. A bloody war of liberation was launched by the people. The war lasted for 9 months ending on 16 December, 1971. Bangladesh was born as an independent sovereign country.

Thus, in December 1971 when the new government was formed local government bodies were found to be in a moribund stage under official control that was instituted in 1969.

The Bangladesh Period

Coming into being on 16 December 1971, the new government engaged its attention to the local government situation immediately. As a first action, by the President's Order No.7 of 1971 issued on January 20, 1972 all local bodies as was inherited as the legacy of the past was formally dissolved and official administrators were appointed to each one of them. The District Council, and the Thana Council were placed under the control of Deputy Commissioner and Subdivisional officer respectively. The Union Councils were variedly placed under the charge of circle officers and Tehsilder-a lower revenue officer. This situation continued upto 1973.

By the President's Order No.22 of 1973 the Union Parishad in the rural areas and the poursava or the municipality in the urban areas reviewed with marginal change in the composition, but the functions remaining more or less same as before. Under the new arrangement, a position of Vice-chairman was created along with the chairman, in each of the union parishad as well as in the Poursavas. The Chairman and Vice-chairman along with the members were to be elected on the basis of adult franchise. Election to the Union parishads and the municipalities were held in 1973. The district council was not revived though the Thana council was reconstituted in 1976 with the Subdivisional officer as the Chairman, the Circle Officer as the Vice-chairman and the Chairman of union parishads as the representative members on ex-officio capacity. In November 1976, a new law called Local Government Ordinance, 1976 was issued covering rural bodies, and in 1977 Poursava Ordinance was issued covering the municipalities without substantially altering the functions of the bodies or the status of the local bodies. However, provisions were created for nominated members were made in the Union Parishad and the Thana parishad. Workers and women represented in the municipalities. The position of Vice-chairman was abolished. Election to the Union parishad and municipalities were held in 1977 under the new law.

During the late years of 1970s and early years of 1980s a move was initiated to revive village level local authority. As an outcome Gram Sarkers (village governments) were first informally established during 1980, throughout the country. Under the local Govt. Amendment Ordinance 1980 village level local bodies called Gram Sarkers were set up

formally with elected chairman and members, there being special representation for women, peasants and landless. These Gram Sarkers were given wide range of functions but without due resource back up or taxation powers. But, as in the case of Basic Democracies of 1960s the Gram Sarkers were used largely for political mobilization by the running party of President Ziaur Rahman. As a result, they enjoyed low credibility.

The period of Ziaur Rahman came to an abrupt end when he was killed on May 30, 1981. In March 1982 General H.M.ERSHAD took over power through a coup and martial law was clamped upon the country. Significant changes have been introduced by the present government in the field of local government, which merits elaborate discussion.

A massive programme of devolution of powers and decentralization of administration has been initiated in the country. The primary aim of this programme has been to bolster rural local bodies, to create one effective local government to take the administration nearer to the people and to facilitate their effective participation in administration and development. As a part of the programme the Government has taken a number of measures covering local government as well as local administration in the rural areas.

With a view to reducing the hierarchical steps of administration the subdivisional tier has been abolished, at the same time it has been decided:

- (i) more powers to and decentralize functions in favour of the local bodies by transferring as many of the responsibilities of the Central Government to them as they can effectively shoulder, and
- (ii) to delegate more powers to Central Government agencies working at lower tiers of Administration in respect of the functions retained by it.

Under the scheme of decentralization, a new name of Upazila or sub-district has been given to the unit of administration which has so long been known as Thana. Though, generally, a Upazila corresponds to a thana; in some places, two thanas have been brought under one Upazila, the Upazila will henceforward be the focal point of administration and development at the local level. This process of conversion into Upazilas has been termed as an 'Upgradation' in that not only more power, authority and function have devolved upon the functionaries of the Central Government and the local Government at Upazila level but also

- (i) more offices have been created there,
- (ii) the status of officer has been elevated,
- (iii) development of physical facilities at the Upazila has been accelerated, and
- (iv) more funds are being channelized to Upazilas directly.

The Resolution of the Government, dated 23rd October, 1983 is the principal instrument by which the process of upgradation has been set into motion. The Resolution sets forth the conceptual as well as operation-

al basis of the process of decentralization. The local Government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganization) Ordinance, 1982 provides the essential legal framework of the local government at the Upazila level.

The Resolution has divided the government functions at the Upazila level into two groups; namely "retained subjects" and "transferred subjects". Accordingly, as per the provisions of the Resolution the responsibility of all development activities at the local level has been transferred to the Upazila parishad. The Government has however retained the direct responsibility for regulatory functions and major development activities of national and regional coverage.

While the Government has transferred most of development functions to the local body, it has taken measures to enhance the power and authority of the officers dealing with the subjects retained by the Central Government. In order to make this effective the control function of higher echelons has been greatly reduced and the Upazila level officers of the Central Government have been vested with considerably enhanced powers. An important step in this regard has been the setting up of Upazila Treasury and the Accounts Office on the one hand and vesting the Upazila level officers with powers of drawal and disbursement of funds. It will therefore not be necessary now for the officers at Upazila to run upto wait for the district level officers for approval and release of funds spent or to be spent by them.

Fundamental changes have been introduced in respect of the programmes executed by the Local Government at the Upazila. Now the Upazila Parishad is not required to wait for sanction and approval of schemes by higher authorities. The parishad has been authorized to prepare its own schemes and execute them.

In order to ensure adequate funds for implementation of development programmes under the transferred subjects by the Upazila Parishad the Government has undertaken to make adequate provisions in the national ADP by way of outright grants from the Central Government. Besides, the Parishad will have its own income from several specific heads prescribed under law. The Parishad may also receive funds placed with it by various agencies of the Central Government for execution of schemes not otherwise transferred to the Parishad. While the direct grants from the Government can only be used to finance development activities under the transferred subjects, the funds generated by itself out of its own sources is available for meeting the recurring expenditure of the Parishad.

With the object of efficient financial management all funds available to the Parishad irrespective of their sources have been consolidated into one Parishad fund and the Parishad can make use of these through its own budgetary mechanism. The budget of the Parishad is prepared in two parts, the revenue and development. Corresponding to the development

budget there is an Annual Development Plan for each Upazila. Besides, the Upazila Parishads have been advised to prepare comprehensive Five Year Plans based on actual local needs.

Considering that it is not possible for the Upazila Parishad as a local government body to attract and appoint qualified and competent manpower the government has made its own functionaries available to the Parishad. The Resolution of 23rd October 1982 clearly states that the "services of officers dealing with subjects transferred to the Upazila Parishad will be deemed to have been placed at the disposal of the Parishad".

As is already evident within the framework of the Upazila Parishad, a number of functionally distinct disciplines have been put together. The Chairman of the Parishad, as the Chief executive, will in this respect be assisted by an executive officer, called Upazila Nirbahi Officer. This Officer will provide professional management support to the Chairman and is a man with good experience in administration and also in development. The Upazila Parishad (conduct of Business) Rules, 1983 delineates the role and function of the Nirbahi Officer in respect of office management as well as internal coordination and liaison with various agencies of the Central Government both vertically and horizontally. The Nirbahi Officer, for this reason, also acts as the principal agent of the Central Government at Upazila level and is responsible for law and order and other regulatory functions not specifically assigned to any other agency.

In order to ensure that the Upazila Parishad can really function as the key institutional body it has been provided that the Parishad will act as the coordinating body for all activities at Upazila level. To ensure effectiveness of the Parishad in this regard the officers dealing with retained subjects have been made "answerable" to the Parishad. This means that the Parishad can call for any report from any officer of the Central Government at the Upazila and when this is done it will be obligatory on the part of such officer to submit report to the Parishad. On the other hand, by virtue of their services being placed at the disposal of the Parishad, the officers dealing with the transferred subjects have been made "accountable" to the Parishad for the whole range of their activities including their conduct. The concepts and mechanism of "answerability" and "accountability" ensure institutional supremacy of the Upazila Parishad.

The Upazila Parishad is designed to be a body consisting of the representative members as well as technical and professional functionaries. Besides the Chairman who is to be elected directly on the basis of universal adult franchise, the Parishad consists of the following members :

- (a) representative members
- (b) Chairman of the Upazila Central Cooperative Association
- (c) three women members
- (d) one nominated member

(e) official members

The representative members consist of the chairmen of all the Union Parishads within the Upazila, who are themselves directly elected on the basis of universal adult franchise. The three women members are nominated by the Government from among women residing in the Upazila. The official members include mostly the officers in charge of development activities within the Parishad. These official members do not however, have any voting power

The Parishad's council is the supreme body having powers to approve budget, development plan and other activities.

Compared to the local government bodies of the past, the Upazila Parishad has been freed from bureaucratic controls. The mechanism of "prescribed authority" and "controlling authority" has been abolished. As a body corporate the Parishad exercises full control over its affairs. The bureaucratic control of the Central Ministry of Local Government over the Parishad in matters of funds provided by the Central Government has been abolished. The relationship of the Central Government has been limited to monitoring, evaluation, inspection, technical guidance and training.

The new thrust in local government as stated in the foregoing paragraphs has left the other tiers of local government, that is, the Zila Parishad (district council), Union Parishad, and also the urban bodies (pourasavas) unaffected.

The Union Parishad and the pourasava continue in their previous status as prescribed under the Local government government Ordinance 1976 and the Pourasava Ordinance 1977 respectively. However, the chairmen of Union Parishads have more elevated role now in the Upazila Parishad. Because, not only that they are the voting members in the Parishad, but also that a vote of no confidence against the chairman of the Upazila Parishad can only be mooted and passed by them.

The current process of reorganization of local government and field administration is still in progress. It is somewhat difficult to assess the impact upon the Zila Parishads. Because, with the emergence of Upazila Parishad as the most important tier of rural local government, this district level local body may be considered redundant. Moreover, with the creation of new districts after bifurcation of old ones, the legal existence of Zila Parishad is open to question. The situation will emerge clear shortly. For the present, the Zila Boards will have a moribund existence till their fate is finally decided.

Outlook for the Future :

The historical sketch that has been drawn in the preceding pages makes it abundantly clear that local government situation in Bangladesh has not settled down even in over one hundred years. This is primarily because of

periodic political changes which affected not only the character of the successive governments but also the status of the nation. The experiments and experiences of the two colonial periods under British and Pakistan were marked by conflicting theses on democracy, bureaucracy and the position of local government. Emergence of Bangladesh as an independent country changes the context substantially. But the process of experimentation still continues. A sound local government system, particularly for the rural areas, is yet to take root. The current experiment with Upazila Parishads reflects the national government's anxiety for settling upon the local government situation finally.

It is apparent that at present there is a great concentration of powers, authority and functions upon the Upazila Parishad. The Upazila Parishads have been equipped with necessary supporting fund, manpower and logistics also. The success of the Upazila Parishads will influence of the future course of local government in the country considerably. Therefore, to what extent they will be able to function effectively is the most crucial question. But one factor is holding the key to the success of Upazilas and that is, the capacity of the elected Chairman of the Upazila Parishad. If the elected Chairman can discharge the powers and perform the functions successfully, the Upazila Parishads will emerge as the most effective local government unit. Else, there may be occasions and excuses to revert the Upazila Parishads to official control and influence. While the future may prove or disprove the point, it should be said that there is considerable boldness in the current trends in local government situation, possibly much more than ever in the long history of local government in the country.