

# FOCUS

## Strengthening Local Govt in Bangladesh

### Whither Upazila Parishad!

The Upazila Parishad came in the process of decentralisation of administration not only in term of organisational form and transfer of responsibilities to the local government but also in the spirit of participation of the people in the decision making process, writes **Mohammad Siddiquer Rahman**.

**I**t was with great fanfare that the upazila parishads were established with the objective of decentralisation of administration to bring it to the doorstep of the people and to bring democratic process in the conduct of local government by the elected representatives of the people. The local government (Thana Parishad and Thana Reorganisation) Ordinance 1982 initially provided for the upgradation of thanas and formation of thana parishad under which the system of decentralisation of administration to the thana level was established. Later on, the upgraded thana parishads were converted into upazila parishads under the Local government (Upazila parishad and upazila reorganisation) ordinance 1982.

The outstanding features of the upazila system were the following:

1. The chairman of the upazila parishad was to be elected directly by the people under adult franchise — A democratic principle that was not established ever before at the thana level since the establishment of thana councils in 1959.
2. The organogram of the thana parishad was strengthened and about 20 thana level officers of development departments were placed under the control and supervision of the upazila parishad.
3. The post of circle officer was upgraded to that of a upazila sub-divisional officer with higher grade of pay and status and was placed under the upazila parishad to act as the secretary of the upazila parishad and to coordinate the activities of all the departments placed under the upazila parishad.
4. The elected chairman of the union parishads and the municipalities within the upazila were made the representatives members of the upazila parishad. Three women members nominated by the govt and the president of the upazila central cooperative society were also members of the upazila parishad. The officers of the development departments were made official members of the parishad but had no vote.

5. Government activities at the upazila level were divided into retained subjects and transferred subjects. The retained subjects remained under the control and supervision of the National government through the hierarchy of government officers and agencies. Transferred subjects were placed under the control and supervision of the upazila parishads and consisted of extension and development activities of agriculture, primary education, health and family planning, rural water supply and public health, rural works programme, food for works programme, relief activities during natural calamities, co-operatives and rural development and fisheries and livestock services.

The main thrust of the activities of the upazila parishad was the preparation of development projects in various sectors and a upazila development plan, and their implementation, monitoring and evaluation. The upazila parishad came with 'Big Bang' in the process of decentralisation of administration not only in terms of organisational form and transfer of responsibilities to the local government but also in the spirit of participation of the people in the decision making process. The spirit of 'bottom up' thinking and planning pre-

vailed.

With the abolition of the sub-division, the Upazila or 'the sub-district' came directly in conduct with the district in all governmental activities and virtually replaced the sub-divisional office.

All thana level departments were expanded and streamlined. All revenue funds for pay — allowance and establishment expenses of the thana level departments were placed under the upazila parishad for disbursement locally. Substantial amount of money under the name of 'Development Assistance Funds' were placed as a block grant to the upazila parishads for development projects to be prepared and approved by the upazila parishads. Each upazila received development funds of the magnitude of average 50 lakh taka for development activities. These funds were allocated to upazilas mainly on the basis of area and population. Part of the ADP allocations of the government were earmarked for the upazilas. Roads, bridges and culverts, education, health and family planning, irrigation channels, market development, agriculture, livestock and fishery and other projects were locally taken up by the upazila parishad. Large amounts of government funds were also placed for the development of upazila infrastructure like the construction of criminal and civil courts, upazila administrative complex, construction of officers quarters and other facilities. The upgradation of the thanas led to the extension and establishment of many offices at the union levels i. e. union health and family planning centres, union parishad office etc. As a result of the introduction of upazila system the upazila headquarters as well as the rural areas were booming with socio-economic activities. Lot of money were injected into the rural economy. In fact many of the government and business activities of the district headquarters shifted to the upazilas.

The initial vigour brought about the upazila system in the public as well as private sector of the rural economy, however, started declining after 2-3 years due to various factors.

The government substantially reduced the amount of development assistance funds allocated to the upazila. The upazilas failed to mobilise local resources through the levy of taxes, rates and other charges, as was expected. The coordination between the various departments of the upazila were strained because of service jealousies. But the most important factor that made the upazila system subject of severe criticism was the corruption and wastage in the utilisation of funds placed with the upazila parishads by the national government.

The upazila system fell into abuses because of its use for political purposes and self-interests. The upazila parishads were considered to be the tower of strength of the political party in power. According to opposition leaders the local governments were used by the government to win political support by giving government funds and resources (whether to their own supporters and party mates) without proper accountability. Some opposition leaders termed it 'Upazila' (a pain in the neck) in place of 'Upazila' and pledged to demolish it when they come to power.

So at the end when the Bangladesh Nationalist Party

won the election and formed government in 1991 one of the first things they did was to abolish the upazila system under the local government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganisation) (Repeal) Ordinance 1991. The main reasons for the abolition of the upazila system and the office of the elected chair man of the upazila were reported to be the following:

1) Most of the upazilas failed to fulfill the objectives of mobilising local resources for undertaking local development activities as the chairman of the upazilas did not take initiatives for the collection of taxes, rates, tolls etc. for fear of losing popularity of the voters.

2) In many cases Business Rules and Financial Regulations were violated by the chairmen and members for their personal gains or party and group interests.

3) In earth-work projects undertaken under Rural works programme Food for works programme and Test relief reports of large scale corruption and wastage were reported particularly in respect of works given to project committees.

The Chairman of the upazila

as chief executive of the

parishad enjoyed almost unbridled power as there was no system of check and balance. Chairmen and members of the parishad could indulge in nepotism, corruption and unfair distribution as there was no effective system of transparency and accountability. Provisions for audit were there but these were not put into effect.

With the abolition of the Upazila parishad the thana was virtually left without a local government institution and as such a vacuum was created in September 1993 Thana Development Coordination Committee was formed with all the chairmen of the Union Parishads of the thana, three women-members nominated by government from amongst the elected women members of the union parishads of the thana and the heads of thana level offices of the government as members. One of the union parishad chairmen of the thana presided over the meeting of the committee each month by rotation according to alphabetical order of their names. The TNO is to provide secretarial service to the committee and the local member of parliament has been made the advisor of the committee. This committee is re-

sponsible mainly for the evaluation and processing of development projects under ADP grants and to send them to the District committee headed by the Minister assigned to the district. FFWP and TR projects are processed by the TNO and sent to the Minister for Disaster Management and Relief, for approval. Sanction for special projects on FFWP and TR are given by the Ministry of Relief. The activities of the thana level has also been greatly reduced due to reduction in government grants and the absence of the concept of 'Development Assistance Funds' for the upazila parishad.

With the abolition of Upazila parishad no serious attempt was made by the government to form a thana parishad (even if the name of upazila was not acceptable) to give it the character of a local government institution.

The thana development coordination committee had no role in coordinating the activities of the various govt departments of the thana. The concept of transferring responsibilities and authority of the National government to the local government was lacking. There was also no element of partici-

pation of the people in the administrative and development activities of the various departments of the government.

The absence of a regular chairman of the thana development coordination committee and the system of monthly meetings of the committee being presided over by one of the union parishad chairman on rotation made the development coordination committee unworkable and ineffective. It was like 'a ship without the captain'. This monthly meeting chairman who would get a chance to preside over a meeting perhaps once a year or even less frequently could hardly give any leadership or sense of direction not to speak of having the mandate of the people or command over his other colleagues in the committee. It is reported that it is even sometimes difficult for the committee to confirm the decisions of the last meeting not to speak of its implementation due to lack of continuity. No body can take the responsibility to achieve anything seriously or to carry out a project of the thana development coordination committee. Implementation of projects are given to union parishads

and project committees and thana lacks the expertise and personnel to deal with zila should deal with matters that has to cover wider areas and need greater mobilization of resources. Above all, thana is a well established administrative unit in our system of government and Article 59 of our Constitution provides that 'local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law'. As such establishment of a local government at the thana level is a Constitutional requirement and cannot be dispensed with.

As a result the administrative responsibilities of the development functions of the thana have virtually been shifted to the TNO, who has no authority over other departments. On the other hand the decision making authority has been virtually transferred to the local member of the parliament in the process the parishad as a local government institution has lost its way.

The rural development programme, FFWP and Test Relief work continue to be done by project committees which in many cases lead to wastages and corruption in the same manner or perhaps more than what it was during the upazila parishad.

The thana development and coordination committee established after the abolition of upazila parishad has thus proved to be a retrograde step in many respects. The strong local government (upazila parishad with chairman elected directly by the government people) was demolished in favour of a thana development outfit which is much more subservient to the officers of the government and the political authorities. The project for Test relief FFWP and ADP grants prepared and approved by union parishads and the thana development committees have to be sent to the Ministers for approval.

In the past the chairmen and members of the upazila parishads were charged with irregularities, wastages and corruptions, the situation that exists now have not fared any better. It is basically a question of government intention and action to stop these irregularities and corruptions whether done in the name of upazila parishad in the past or done now in the name of union parishads or project committees.

Thus the process of decentralisation has in fact been reversed into process of centralisation and the concept of local government as a self government institution has virtually been turned into that of a subordinate agency of the National government. This in retrospect is a step going back in time without any forward looking vision. After all, 'the remedy for a leak in the roof lies in its repair and renovation and not in the demolition of the structure'.

The weather too is a factor, in winter or in summer, many use shawls or simply chadars. The dress should include matching shawls or chadars.

I am not an artist and thus do not have a brain filled with ideas. The above were just some to start with hoping that readers would send in their ideas and the authorities would take notice.

I think like the national flag, the national costume is equally important, otherwise we advertise costumes of an alien culture. Like Kurtas worn in India's Rajasthan or Pakistan's North-West Frontier Province or the style of Sari worn by women in Sri Lanka.

Among many important items on the government's agenda, the national dress should get a priority and can be announced on February 21, 1997, to honour the martyrs' of the Bengali language movement on the basis of national consensus. Better late, then never.

One may call into question the necessity of local government at the Thana/Upazila level and suggest that this tier should be abolished and that only zila parishad and union parishads should exist and nothing in between. But we have the experience of a local government at the thana level for more than 45 years. We have seen that the people have accepted it and it can work if one gives it a serious try. It has the advantage of being nearer to the grassroots level and within easier reach and access which the zila lacks. Zila should deal with inter-zila matter and matter which cannot be technically or effectively handled at the thana level or matters in which the

thana lacks the expertise and personnel to deal with zila should deal with matters that has to cover wider areas and need greater mobilization of resources. Above all, thana is a well established administrative unit in our system of government and Article 59 of our Constitution provides that 'local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies composed of persons elected in accordance with law'. As such establishment of a local government at the thana level is a Constitutional requirement and cannot be dispensed with.

The answer seems to be to promote and establish a system of a strong and effective local government institution at thana level whether we call it a upazila or a thana parishad (what's in a name if it gives the fragrance?) It should have full authority and powers given to the elected parishad under an act of parliament through a process of devolution. At the same time it should have all the basic elements of a good local government. We must also carefully avoid the pitfalls in which the upazila parishad had fallen in the past due to lack of transparency in the decision making process and lack of accountability to the government and to the people. With transfer of responsibilities to the local government there should be statutory provisions of resource transfer to the upazilas. Activities transferred to the local government and the responsibilities of officers placed under the local government for undertaking these functions should be more specific — Decision making process should be made more transparent and open to the public. Check and balance needs to be established to avoid concentration of powers in the hands of the chairman or in any one hand. Project committees should supervise projects rather than work as contractors (expect very small T R work). Rigorous Audit and inspection by statutory authorities shall have to be ensured. Institutional arrangements must be made for accountability to the people and their representatives. The parishad and its officers and employees must account for all their deeds.

The Role of the Member of the Parliament in the local government activities should be carefully designed. He should not enter into the realm of decision making process of the upazila parishad. At the same time he should extend his cooperation and support to the parishad by projecting the problems and difficulties of the locality to the National government and seeking greater help and resources for the locality. He can also play an important role in ensuring public accountability and point out cases of complaints and wastages to the parishad.

Our experience in the operation of the upazila parishads in the past should reveal to us the defects and deficiencies which should now be rectified in our 'New approach to the upazila system'.

The writer is a former Ambassador and Cabinet Secretary

### What Should Our National Dress Be?

**A**s we approach celebrations to mark our great Victory Day on December 16, one cannot help but wonder what we have accomplished and not since that day 25 years ago, which is still vivid in my mind.

I remember one scene near the current State Guest House 'Sugandha'. I saw a Pakistani soldier lying in a pool of blood and on the opposite, Mukti Joddha (freedom fighter) still clutching his automatic gun. They each did their duty — one tried to save his country and the other to kill the last of the enemy who raped Bangladesh.

How did I identify them? Of course by their dress. The Pakistani was in his uniform and the freedom fighter had a 'Gancha' wrapped around his waist, with no boots on.

As we celebrate Bangladesh's 25th Victory Day, we have not yet set our mind about our national dress. In official functions what is described as 'normal' is an alien dress. I wore Pajama and Punjabi or pant and shirt, but his high necked coat — popularly called 'Mujib Coat' became his trade mark. President Ziaur Rahman brought with him the 'Safari Suit' and the goggles, while Mr Hussain Muhammad Ershad, MP, during his presidency introduced the 'Prince Coat'. But none declared any as the national men's costume. Former prime

tried to impress the people by a particular style of dress. Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujib and Lungi: This is the most commonly worn dress in Bangladesh and noted fashion designer Bibi Russel has done considerable work on this as far as I have seen in newspapers. Ms Russel has also used 'Gancha' or commonly used cotton towel. This dress is above politics as no politician has tried to formalise it so far.

There may be arguments about pros and cons of wearing

**For Men**  
Fotua and Lungi: This is the most commonly worn dress in Bangladesh and noted fashion designer Bibi Russel has done considerable work on this as far as I have seen in newspapers. Ms Russel has also used 'Gancha' or commonly used cotton towel. This dress is above politics as no politician has tried to formalise it so far.

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### IN FOOL'S PARADISE?

by Nadeem Qadir

minister Khaleda Zia or current Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina have shown their choice about Saris, but none have been identified as the national women's costume.

It is important to have a national costume as it speaks of the country abroad without naming it. It is a reflection of the nation, its people, culture and geography.

The rate of fashion shows

have gone up in the country in recent days, but so far those responsible for taking a decision on our national dress have possibly ignored these fearing that it might give rise to a new political issue.

I remember, at least twice, past governments had discussed the idea of a national dress. Possibly, the issue became technically difficult because of politics and met with an early death. Every leader we had since the birth of Bangladesh

a lungi, but we can find decent ways of wearing it as they have done in neighbouring Myanmar (Burma) and Thailand. The fotua can be designed specially to a classic look.

There may be arguments about pros and cons of wearing

**For Women**

Of course it is Saris. We have silk, Tangail, Nakshi, Katans, Jandani and so many varieties. All we have do, pick one that is affordable for all and easily available. On this we have to agree on the way it will

School 4:20 Mitti Sona 5:00 Allah Huma Labbaik 5:25 Qabhi Mein Soochha Hoen (Drama Serial) 6:25 Alou Courses 7:00 Dhank 7:45 English News 8:15 UN Quiz 8:45 Jab (Drama Serial) 9:00 Break for Headline News 10:00 Khabarnama 11:20 VCD Top Ten (Pakistani Video Countdown) 12:30 Dr Quin: Medicine Women (Jean Saylor) 1:35 Khas Khas Khabrain/ Close down

11:30 Dastaan 12:00 Daraar 12:30 TVS Sa Re Ga Ma 1:15 Jhalak 1:30 Syaram's Cine Magic 2:00 Zee Arabic Programme 2:30 Asian U22 Champ for Men 2nd Semi Final 6:30 ATP Tennis Kremlin Cup 2nd Semifinal 8:30 Live 1996 Asian Cup Final Play Off 9:30 SuperCup Paris, France 10:00 Cricket Hall of Fame 10:30 The Asian Football Show 12:00mm Prime Boxing 1:30 Thai Kickboxing Highlights 2:30 Trans World Sport 3:30 WTA Tour Bank Of The West Classic 5:00 Gillette World Sport Special 5:30 Asian U22 Champ for Men 2nd Semi Final

12:30 Young Buzz 1:00 Humrahi 1:30 Sargam 2:00 Music Time 3:00 Karz 3:30 Yeh Duniya 4:00 Kal Bhi Aaj Bhi 4:30 Uppanyas 5:00 Frooti It's My Choice 5:30 Dil Dekha Dekho 6:30 Manoranjan 7:00 People's Club 7:30 Nukkad 8:00 Filmi Chat 8:30 Casper Number One 9:00 Hit Thi Hit Hai 9:30 Purushkhetra 10:30 Akashash 11:00 Moov Usha Uthup Show 11:30 Chalo Cinema 12:00 Akashash 12:30 Jhuno Nacho 1:30 Devotional 2:30 Taranne 3:30 Hunste Hunste

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