

GRAM PARISHAD

Needed Some Fine Tuning to Meet the Fundamentals

by Mohammad Siddiqueer Rahman

Some people think that Gram Parishad as a Local Government will not be effective and may lead to quarrels and intrigues in the village society. This opinion is not only based on a negative attitude but is against the principles of democracy.

extent as certain fundamental principles of a Local Government is lacking in the Gram Parishad law.

Fundamentals of Local Government that need to be incorporated in the Gram Parishad law

1. Gram Parishad should consist of *grams* not wards. Our constitution requires Local Government to be established in an area which constitutes an administrative unit.

The Local Government Gram Parishad Act 1997 in fact provides for a Ward Parishad for each ward and not a parishad for the *gram*. Ward is an artificial boundary created in the past for purpose of election and does not give identity of any human settlement or a habitat. In most cases a ward is composed of more than one village and sometimes even less than a large village. On an average one and a half village constitute a ward. Ward was never an administrative unit. In fact, *gram* which is synonymous with a *mouza* has been the traditional unit for revenue administration in Bangladesh before the time of the Moghuls. Above all, *gram* gives the emotional, socio-economic, political and geographical unity to the people. If someone asks me, "Where do you come from?" I say, Dharabhang village of Nabinagar Thana in Brahmanbaria district and never say I came from No. 1 ward of Barikandi union.

Predicament of the government for holding immediate election

i) We can understand the predicament of the government

for holding the election to Gram and the Union Parishads immediately as announced by the government. The delimitation of the boundary of the *gram* (village) and the revision of its voter list will take time and cannot be done without further delaying the election. That is why ward committees, as they exist now, have become so convenient to be named as Gram Parishad for the purpose of holding election to Gram Parishads and Union Parishads. But this arrangement takes away the basic philosophy and objectives of Gram Parishad. Even if the present election may be held on the basis of wards being treated as Gram Parishad, action should be taken after this election to amend the law to constitute a Gram Parishad for each *gram* (village) during subsequent elections. If we can deal with 40,059 ward councils, there is no reason why we cannot deal with 59,990 Gram Parishads. It is not necessary that each union should have the same number of Gram Parishads. Already every thana has widely varying number of Union Parishads (varying mostly from 6 to 22 Unions) and each union may have as many Gram Parishads as there are *grams* irrespective of their size and population. Let the people feel that Gram Parishad is their own parishad and not overlap other *gram*. It is also provided in the Gram Parishad law that the name of the Gram Parishad will be named on the basis of ward number of the ward council.

This would take away the very basis of Gram Parishad and expose the artificial nature of the

boundary and identification of the Gram (ward) Parishad.

(ii) Election of Gram Parishad should be held under the authority of the election commission under secret ballot. Local Government according to the Constitution of Bangladesh should be composed of persons elected by the people of the area which constitutes the Local Government body. Under the Local government (Gram Parishad Act, 1997), it is provided that election will be held in the ward concerned in a meeting of the male and female voters of the area under the supervision of the "directing" authority. Such an election conducted by an administrative authority designated by the government may be questionable about being a free and fair election. The election to be free should be conducted by a constitutional authority (election commission) and should be based on universal adult franchise under a system of secret ballot.

If this basic requirement of a free and fair election is not met, there is likely hood of quarrels, insights and riots amongst the people during an open election. An election conducted by an executive authority of the government may also be politically or otherwise influenced.

(iii) A Local Government must have full authority to carry out its own responsibilities and not be dependent on any other authority. The Constitution of Bangladesh requires that the parliament will confer powers on the local government bodies and the elected representative constituting the Local

Government shall take decisions in exercising these powers. But in the Gram Parishad law, the directing authority (an executive officer or agency of the government) has been given certain authority i.e. to fix where the office of the Gram Parishad will be established. Such matters should be decided by the parishad by a majority vote and not by the executive authority of the government. The procedure for the conduct of meetings of the Local Government should be approved by the Government under its rule making authorities and not by any directing authority as provided in the Gram Parishad law.

(iv) An elected representative should not be removed from the office by any executive authority. The Gram Parishad law provides that directing authority may also after due inquiry remove any member of Gram Parishad from his post. This is against the principles of democratic institutions. Removal of elected representative should not be allowed to be done except under the order of a competent court of law to be provided under the law.

(v) Acting Chairman should not be nominated by the directing authority; the power given to the directing authority to nominate any person to act as a Chairman in the event of vacancy in the post of Chairman or in the absence or illness of the Chairman, is undemocratic and against the fundamental principle of a Local Government.

Since Chairman of the Gram Parishad is elected by the people, a temporary or acting

Chairman should be elected by the elected members of the Gram Parishad. There is no scope for nomination of any Chairman or Member of any Local Government who must, according to constitution, be an elected representative.

(vi) The concept of a "Directing Authority" designated by the government to control the affairs of the Gram Parishad is inconsistent with the concept of Local Government.

(vii) A Local Government to be effective must have its own funds: The Constitution provides under Article 60, that the parliament by law shall confer powers including powers to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare that budget and to maintain funds. The Gram Parishad does not have any such power. However at the initial stage it may not be possible for Gram Parishad to levy taxes or to collect them but gradually some tax base should be given to them and also give them to local resources like forestry, fishery etc., to earn some income.

Instead of making Gram Parishad entirely dependent on the Union Parishad and the Directing Authority even for the day to day requirement of office expenses and stationeries government should give some grants directly to each Gram Parishad until such time they are capable of collecting taxes.

Such grants are needed to meet two basic needs — (i) to have an honorary Secretary (an official of parishad) to keep records and to work as the Clerk of the Gram Parishad. He may be appointed by the Chairman of Gram Parishad with approval of the parishad and paid a small honorarium, say, Tk 500 per month and (ii) to meet the office expenses and cost of stationeries, an amount of Tk 10,000 per Gram Parishad per year should be enough to meet these office expenses. This

would need roughly 60 crore taka a year for all the Gram Parishads and would strengthen the Gram Parishad in carrying out its activities.

(viii) Gram Parishad is required to give cooperation to government agencies and to do voluntary work, but has no specific responsibility of their own and no funds. Gram Parishad law requires the Gram Parishad to (i) submit some reports to the Union Parishads, (ii) extend cooperation to the authority in the implementation of large project and (iii) to encourage the villagers to form cooperatives and to undertake income-generating projects like fishery, livestock, forestry etc. But they have no specific responsibility nor any matching funds to undertake any concrete activity of their own. The activities enumerated as functions of the Gram Parishad are only expressions of intentions and to give cooperation and reports or information required by the Union Parishad. Why not the government give a token grant of average Taka 10,000 to each *gram* (the amount will be allotted on the basis of weightage of area and population). This will cost the government 60 crore taka a year @ average Tk 10,000 per Gram Parishad. This is nothing compared to the enthusiasm with it will create amongst the village people in participating governance and development activities of the Local Government.

The Gram Parishad should really be made a self-governing institution based on the principles of people's participation on the democratic process in the light of the observations given above. We want to see villagers vibrant with ideas and enthusiasm to participate in governance and national development through the Gram Parishad.

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THIS is for the first time in the history of Local Government in Bangladesh for more than a century that a Local Government has been established under the law at the lowest unit of human settlement i.e. at the village or *gram* level. Local Government has never before been conceived below the level of Union Parishad which was established in 1885. Establishment of Gram Parishad is a landmark in the development of Local Government institutions in Bangladesh where the village itself, has become a Local Government organisation. Some people think that Gram Parishad as a Local Government will not be effective and may lead to quarrels and intrigues in the village society. This opinion is not only based on a negative attitude but is against the principles of democracy.

Why should we have Gram Parishad at all? The answer may be found in the following:

1. Bangladesh consists of 5,999 (say 60,000) *mouzas* or villages and the people living in these villages constitute 77% of the population of the country. Local Government is necessary to enable these rural people to understand the political process of a democratic government and to play their role and responsibility in the governance of the country.

2. The most important reason for identifying the *gram* as the basic unit of Local Government is the fact that we belong to the *gram*. If we can take care of 60,000 *grams* we can actually take care of the whole country and the entire people, because even the townsmen have mostly their roots in the *gram* it gives us its identity.

3. Gram Parishad is necessary for the rural population to enable the people to be involved

in the democratic process through participation in governance, development and social welfare activities of the people of the area.

4. To enable the people of the *gram* to identify the problems and the felt needs of the people of the *gram* and to prepare plans and programmes for meeting the needs and solving the problems of the people of the area and to encourage the people of the village to undertake self-reliance activities.

5. To undertake development plans and programmes within the Gram Parishad by raising funds through taxes as provided for under the law or by harnessing local resources and by proper utilisation of funds given by the National Government or other tiers of Local Government, thereby initiating "Bottom-up" planning.

6. To carry out the tasks of administration, development and social welfare activities which are assigned to them under the law or delegated to them by the government within the area of Gram Parishad.

7. To coordinate the activities of the officers and extension staff of various departments of the government (i.e. Agriculture, Health and Family Planning, Sanitation and Water Supply, Education and Environment etc) and the NGOs/voluntary organisations to ensure that their activities are responsive to the needs of the people and promote the interest of the people of the *gram*.

8. To carry out such other activities as may be deemed necessary in the interest of the people of the Gram Parishad. The establishment of Gram Parishad as a Local Government institution is a big leap forward in involving the people at the grassroot level in the democratic process. But the noble objectives for which Gram Parishad has been established as a Local Government seems to have been frustrated to some

MOST of the universities in Bangladesh, except however, the private ones, are suffering from many problems. The most difficult and painful one is campus violence. These universities are very often rocked by frequent violence that claim a number of innocent lives. There is, of course, another deep-rooted problem — the problem of teachers' politics. Instead of dedicating themselves to research and studies, most of the university teachers are engaged in quasi-fulltime politics. Such a situation is undoubtedly detrimental to congenial academic atmosphere. Recently, it has caught the imagination of many individuals including the President of the country. Those who really care about the country, cannot but worry about the condition of our educational institutions which are supposed to produce the future leaders of the country. Thus the time has come for reviewing the higher education system and the institutions as well.

We have celebrated the 25th year of our independence. Twenty-five years may not be sufficient for a nation to make significant progress, especially for a war-torn country like Bangladesh. Yet during this period, important planning should have been made for future development. The new leadership, after the independence in 1971, was primarily busy in putting the house in order. It, however, constituted the Qudrat-i-Khuda Commission to make recommendations for recasting the education system of the country. Before the government could take any decision on the Commission's report, a bloody coup d'état swept the leaders away. The military leaders threw the baby with the bathwater. They not only killed the founding father of the nation and the members of his family,

they also changed many of the previous government's decisions. Naturally, the report of the Commission was shelved for ever. Subsequently, however, one or two Education Commissions were constituted, but their reports were never published. No useful step has been taken since to improve the education system — the successive governments managed the affairs on an *ad hoc* basis. Often some cosmetic changes were made keeping the basic structure intact. Such a policy has done more damage than improve the condition. The problem has now become almost unmanageable.

It is high time that we think closely about our higher education system and formulate a pragmatic policy to face the twenty-first century. This is also the time when even the developed nations are preparing themselves to face the challenges of the new century. Bangladesh with so many problems has to think more than the developed nations.

Let us talk first about the prevailing state of higher education. At the moment there are six general and four technical universities in Bangladesh, funded by the government. Side by side, there are several private universities also. Let us concentrate mainly on those universities funded by the government.

It is generally considered that higher education is a birth-right for all citizens in Bangladesh. It is also assumed that anybody with a Higher Secondary Certificate should be allowed to enter the university and get an M.A., M.Sc. or an equivalent degree. Government is bound, it is believed, to provide a student with all facilities, so that he can obtain the degrees at a minimum cost. Whereas in most of the developed countries, higher education is open to a few talented students and not to all.

Managing University Education in Bangladesh

by Dr Nurul H Choudhury

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Moreover, the cost of higher education is also very high. It has been made so to restrict the number of candidates. Consequently, most of the students enter the job market after passing grade twelve, many go for the undergraduate programmes, and the rest few seek higher degrees.

Universities here (most of these were founded before the inception of Bangladesh) were set up to handle limited number of students. Now such number has increased four to five times than the universities are able to provide physical facilities for. Equally, the academic departments are not equipped to teach such a large number of students. The library facilities are not enough for such a huge number of students. Each residential hall was designed to provide accommodation for a few hundred students. Now almost three to four times as many students reside there. While the number of students is increasing considerably, the government is not enhancing its allocation of fund proportionately. Thus, it has become impossible to provide basic education not to speak of quality education.

It is not simply the number of students that is causing impediment to useful education at the universities. Politicisation of the whole system is also responsible for the downward trend of the higher education system in Bangladesh.

The Pakistani rulers, in their anti-Bengali policies, met the stiffest resistance from the students. The students, imbued with patriotism, mobilized the people and challenged the Pakistani rulers. They were the

vanguards of democracy and human rights. It was the universities where the movement originated and the students provided the leadership. Since then, the universities have been the power-base and the political parties endeavoured to retain control over the students. In so doing, the parties, it is alleged, often provided them with money and arms (the two most powerful ingredients of Bangladesh politics), to make most of it. It should be mentioned here that almost each political party in Bangladesh has its student wing.

Like the students, most of the teachers are also deeply engaged in politics, towing along the line of the national political parties. Teachers' politics originated in 1973 when the University Acts were implemented. To grant full autonomy to the universities, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's government passed these Acts through the Parliament. These Acts liberated the universities from the 'Black Laws' of the Pakistan period. These 'Black Laws' curbed the autonomy of the universities. Furthermore, these laws prevented the teachers from holding any political opinion, criticising the government or the university administration. These laws definitely restricted the teachers' activities and were put into effect to protect the oppressive and anti-Bengali regime. The university teachers opposed the Pakistani rulers and made common cause with the people of the then East Pakistan in their movement for democracy. The teachers also craved for the democratisation of the university administration.

This led to the passing of the 1973 Acts (for Dhaka, Rajshahi, Chittagong and Jahangirnagar universities only). The purpose of these Acts was to broad-base the university administration involving people within and outside the university. Although these Acts were commendable in spirit, but subsequently, the teachers and the government began to misuse them. The Acts provide for the election of teachers' representatives to different bodies that run the university affairs. The Acts also provide that the Senate, consisting of teachers' representatives, students' and Registered Graduates' representatives, and other members nominated by the government, should prepare a panel of three members. Then it is for the Chancellor (in some cases the President or otherwise the Prime Minister) to appoint a vice-chancellor for a particular university from this three-member panel. Usually the Senate nominates teachers of the respective university to this panel. Thus the process paves the way for the teachers to indulge into politics.

The ultimate aim of the ambitious teachers is to become the vice-chancellor and there-

fore involve themselves into university politics to realise this aim. To create the power-base, much attention is given to the recruitment of like-minded teachers. Good academic qualifications of candidates do not always guarantee that they will be appointed teachers of the university. Connection with the powerful lobby in the university will often ensure the appointment. As part of their obligation to those teachers who made their entry to the university possible, the recruits support them in any election to the offices of Dean, Syndicate, etc. Thus, it is not unrealistic to suggest that in most cases 'voters' are recruited and noted teachers!

The potential contender for the post of vice-chancellor works to widen his power-base among the teachers and the latter support him not without dividend. The supporters know it very well that when their candidate becomes vice-chancellor, they will be the beneficiaries. They will get preference over others for provostship or house-ownership of a residential hall, proctorship, etc. As is reality, the government is the ultimate authority for the appoint-

ment of the vice-chancellor, the prospective candidate requires to have a good link with the ruling party. Others also maintain their connection with different parties keeping in view that when their turn will come, they that their parties will return to power. The leaders of the political parties seize upon the opportunity to establish their influence on the university teachers. The teachers, therefore, widen their sphere of activities not only beyond the classrooms, but also outside the university. Thus, it seems that the provision for the nomination of the vice-chancellor's panel is an important factor for drawing the university teachers into politics and working as appendages to the political parties.

The 1973 University Acts also have provisions for electing deans and teachers' representatives to the Syndicate, Senate, Planning and Development, and Finance Committee. In a word, the University Acts have provided for many elections and kept the teachers busy otherwise. The ultimate goal of an aspirant teacher is to include his name in the vice-chancellor's panel and finally become vice-chancellor, the supreme head of a university. So to limit teachers' politics, the government should take initiative to amend the clause of the Acts relating to the vice-chancellor's appointment. In its place, there may be a provision for a Search

Committee, consisting of the Chief Justice, a retired vice-chancellor, a Chancellor's nominee, and an eminent scholar. After collecting information from different sources, this Committee should prepare a panel of two or three members.

Then the Chancellor should appoint a vice-chancellor from this panel. This, of course, may not succeed in de-linking the teachers from the political parties, but it can at least restrict them in creating their power-base on the campus. However, any such amendment must be made in consultation with the teachers' representatives.

To arrest the overall deterioration of the conditions of the universities, the government should take immediate action. An all-party conference should be organised and presided over by the President of the country.

The conference should aim at de-linking both the teachers and the students and minimising politics on the campuses. In addition, the government should restrict higher education and simultaneously create job opportunities for those who cannot enter the universities. Time is running out and unless positive steps are taken before long, the nation will not exultate us.

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NON-FORMAL PRIMARY EDUCATION

An Exceptional Enterprise for Reading Materials

by Asrafuzzaman

LIKE in many other developing countries of the world, programme of universal primary education is in progress also in Bangladesh. Today's world is a rapidly changing one. Demand for education in the society is increasing very quickly. To fulfil it the government has come forward and also other non-government organisations. There are various enterprises in their educational programme. As a result over the past few years the number of male and female students has increased remarkably, particularly girls have come forward in a greater number.

NGOs have shown a remarkable success in their programme in the past two and

half decades. In this field BRAC has taken a pioneer's role, undoubtedly. And works of Proshika, Gono Shahajjo Sangstha (GSS), Swarnibar Bangladesh, Gono Udayan Prochasta, CCDB, FTVDB, VERC are also worth mentioning.

By conducting non-formal education programme besides the formal education, government and NGOs have obviously achieved a progress. But, there is scarcity of text books in the non-formal primary education programme conducted by NGOs. Though some NGOs have published some reading materials within their own network it is not sufficient in comparison to need. There exists a vacuum in

the field of text and follow-up books. To fill in this vacuum 'The Book Group' has come forward. Writing and publish-

these summarising and simplifying works. By reading these classics the learners will be acquainted with the treasures of world literature and also at the same time their knowledge of



A non-formal primary education school class in progress. Photo: Courtesy—BRAC

ing books for the students of non-formal schools are the main functions of this Book Group. At primary stage it has taken in hand the work of summarising and simplifying the classics of Bengali and world literature. So far they have published under this programme, four books namely 'Nildarpan', 'Abdullah', 'Rajshahi' and 'Merchant of Venice'. Prominent writers of the country have performed

letters will be increased as they enjoy reading the stories. Their habit of reading will continue to sustain and the acquired knowledge will not be lost for lack of culture.

While the above books published by 'The Book Group' are being used by leading NGOs in their education programme, the Group will proceed with its programme to play a vital role in the field of non-formal education.



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