

Book Review***DECENTRALISATION AND
DEVELOPMENT THEORY AND
PRACTICE IN BANGLADESH***

Noore Alam Siddiquee
University of Dhaka, 1997.

Decentralisation as a policy or practice has received much attention in recent years as it centres around one of the most crucial and recurring debates in the developing world about the degree of control that central governments can and should have over development planning and administration. Most of the developing countries in some form or other have experienced decentralisation. According to Smith, decentralisation has proven to be ideologically indispensable throughout the Third World; its varied advocates have emphasised the claims that decentralisation can be the unifying force in the consolidation of new national identities, or a remedy for the centralised bureaucracies, or a policy that will: "soften resistance to the inevitable and potentially destabilising social changes that development brings about" (Smith 1988 : 214).

Dr. Noore Alam Siddiquee in his book *'Decentralisation and Development : Theory and Practice in Bangladesh'* points out that though developing countries have utilised decentralisation as a strategy for promoting socio-development, decentralisation has

remained a rhetoric and in practice served only interests of national and local elite. And in the case of Bangladesh, successive regimes have initiated and implemented a number of decentralisation programmes to revitalise the local government system and to enable local bodies to play a more active role in national development especially in rural transformation. But in actual practice, explicit objectives remained unrealised or mere rhetoric and implicit objectives of the ruling elite have gained prominence.

The book under review grew out of the revised version of Noore Alam Siddiquee's doctoral thesis at the Institute for Development Policy and Management, University of Manchester. The book consisting of ten chapters have focused upon the Upazila decentralisation in Bangladesh during period 1982-1991. This study revolves around three main propositions I. In cases, where resource disparities exist in countries like Bangladesh, decentralisation of power is most likely to lead to the control of local organisations by the elite for extraction of scarce resources; proposition II. Decentralisation with its accompanying increase of power and resources at the local level widens opportunities for patronage, corruption, and misappropriation of public resources. Proposition III. Decentralisation was used by the central government to consolidate their power base and exercising state authority at local level. Dr. Siddiquee in his study shows that all the three propositions remain valid in case of the Upazila Decentralisation in Bangladesh.

Chapter 1 of the book centres around the objectives of the study, the methodologies used, and the limitations encountered during the endeavour. Chapter 2 examines the conceptual issues of development, decentralisation, rural development and decentralisation as a tool of development strategy. This chapter also identifies a number of key elements like poverty alleviation, equity, employment, participation, empowerment and sustainability which have been examined as criteria to assess whether Upazila decentralisation in Bangladesh played any significant role in rural development. The next chapter i.e. chapter 3

examines the linkages between decentralisation and development. Here it has been shown how theorists have conflicting views about the applicability and potentials of decentralisation. The development approach view of decentralisation as a tool for better government services and accelerated development at the grass roots level. It is thus a normative view and overlooks the underlying issues and the political implications of decentralisation. On the other hand, the alternative view sees decentralisation as contradictory as there are inherent dialectics involved with the idea especially in developing countries, where it used by elite to use and abuse their own narrow interests.

Chapter 4 reviews the experience of decentralisation and rural development initiatives in Bangladesh. It shows how successive regimes in Bangladesh have used decentralisation merely as rhetoric and not as a tool to deconcentrate power. The measures taken were more in terms of political expediency rather than achieving publicly pronounced aims like people's participation and power given to the local levels. The author opines that this "negated the possibility of affecting any significant changes in the rural administration and development" (p 93). The following chapter examined the Upazila approach to decentralisation (1982-1991) initiated by the Ershad regime in Bangladesh. The 'Upazila Decentralisation' was claimed to be a landmark in the socio-political history of Bangladesh as it was designed to bring development administration out of bureaucratic control and place it with the elected representatives of the people as the focal point of the decision making process by devolving power to a local authority at the Upazila (sub-district level). However, that claim has only proved to be nebulous. In this chapter the author shows how the Upazila remained subservient to the central government and the tensions between concepts underpinning the statutes of the Upazila and the centralist spirit of the government which guided the implementation of the decentralisation policy.

In the following three chapters, the performance of the Upazila system and the local processes involved in its operation are examined. Chapter 6 looks at the state of the agricultural development under the Upazila system. It is shown that inspite of the Upazila decentralisation, there has been little positive impact on agriculture. The procedural and allocation systems under the Upazila system allowed the local elite to have easy access to agricultural assets and inputs the sector offered. This helped to maintain status quo in the rural areas and by establishing a support base at the rural areas, the central government was legitimised. Chapter 7 looks at the scenario of the health sector at the Upazila level, where inspite of the increased emphasis on health, very little had been achieved. In practice, community involvement has been negligible and services were poor, supply of medicines and other necessary inputs inadequate and spectre of corruption ate away the core of the overall system.

Chapter 9 examines the issue of income generating activities at the Upazila level where decentralisation failed to have any positive impact on the lives of the rural poor. In fact the programmes intended for the rural poor mainly benefited the rural elite and government officials. They offered nothing more than providing some employment opportunities for some people during lean seasons. Moreover, this failure of the Upazila opened the door of the NGO intervention in rural areas as an alternative. Thus this chapter looks at one of the most prominent goals of decentralisation i.e. access and participation of the poor. Dr. Siddiquee shows that contrary to the stated goals of participation at the grass roots level, it contributed towards straightening of resources and power base of the already privileged minority - the elite. This has changed the power fabric at the rural areas, by increasing the tensions among the various groups. The decentralisation has also given rise to new group of middle-men power brokers who prevented to a large extent the access and participation

of the rural poor. This has also given rise to the growth and influence of NGOS.

In the concluding chapter the writer asserts that the benefits of decentralisation have largely turned out to be rhetoric, as it did not make the people participate in activities affecting them. It did not improve the delivery of services nor did it make the Upazila administration accountable to the local people. Instead influential patrons, middlemen and brokers stepped in and as a result benefited the local elite. The author argues that the success of a reform package largely depends on political commitment and in the case of Bangladesh the implicit aim of the government was to utilize the Upazila system to extend its power base into the rural areas and legitimise its existence. Dr. Siddiquee points out that the benefits of decentralisation are more often asserted than they are actually demonstrated in practice and that "it is clearly no panacea for the administrative, political and economic problems being confronted by developing countries. That is why the implementation of the decentralisation policy did not solve these problems but rather in many cases heightened them" (p.267). Finally in the case of Bangladesh, he opines that the growth of NGOs with access to and potential of organising the rural poor and the return of parliamentary democracy in the country in the 1990s just might have "created grounds that the 1990s may see policies of decentralisation that are less manipulative than those in the past" (ibid).

Dr. Siddiquee's study although an excellent one ends both with a pessimistic and ambiguous note. While on one hand, he points out that decentralisation is no panacea for the problems faced by developing countries; on the other he hopes that future decentralisation efforts would be less manipulative in Bangladesh ! It should be noted that like any other public policy, decentralisation cannot be examined in isolation of the context within which it takes place. Context means the nature of the state power, socio-political set-up of the country, its

administrative bureaucratic structure, its economic structure and the socio-cultural attitudes and traits of the elite and masses which shape the actions of the stakeholders involved (i.e. the politicians, bureaucrats, local elite, and the masses themselves). Accordingly, one would argue that decentralisation in the case of Bangladesh as in many other countries have to be seen in the context in which it was implemented. Certainly in the case of Bangladesh, the state power was itself authoritarian and in that context it laid the foundation of a vertical patron-client relationship with the local elite. Moreover, the Upazila decentralisation in Bangladesh was never in the true sense proper devolution - as it has been claimed to be. It was rather a mixed bag of deconcentration and devolution. Therefore, the issue of how decentralisation was practised in Bangladesh is more at stake than the concept itself. One would therefore surmise that the author had ventured a bit too much on generalisations.

Though the author acknowledges that the book has been developed from his doctoral thesis, it would have been preferable if the details of the methodology of the study, methods of data collection, etc. which one expects in a thesis and generally not in a book could have been avoided altogether or included in some other form in the introductory chapter. Moreover, chapters 2 and 3 could have been dovetailed into a single chapter, since both of them deal with the concepts of decentralisation and development.

It is generally thought that decentralisation results in greater participation of the people. However, this does not always materialise as has been shown in the case of Bangladesh by the author. In addition to problems of local elite taking advantage and denying access to the common people, one would argue that factors like the prevailing political system, nature of access structure for articulation of demands, nature of representation in political processes, as well as the socio-cultural traditions of a particular country affect participation. Moreover in the South Asian context, the contrasts

between formal structures of state power and informal patterns of power relations are striking. It is often pointed out that in this area many individuals feel that they will be accepted and looked after by the collectivity if they behave in expected ways. As such, the effect and interaction of these factors with the policy of decentralisation and the expected result of greater participation could have been more deeply analysed in the study. This might have answered more questions as to 'why' decentralisation did not work out the way it was supposed to be.

However, Dr. Siddiquee explores the effects of decentralisation in great detail based on his fieldwork and that should prove to be fascinating reading both for researchers and policy makers alike. It can serve as an eye opener for the governing elite in Bangladesh and add to the growing realisation that power belongs to the people and they deserve to have at least some of it back. Moreover, in the concluding chapters the author raises the increasingly crucial issue of the role of the NGOs who are practicing 'decentralisation by default' in rural areas of Bangladesh. Whether the NGOs will play a greater role in catalysing the civil society and contribute towards making future decentralisation efforts successful is a crucial question that needs looking into more extensively in light of the decision of the present government to reintroduce Upazila system. The book will undoubtedly remain as a great contribution in understanding the complexities of decentralisation in developing countries and help to understand the concept both in theory and in practice.

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