

## Importance of Local Self-Government for the Promotion of Democracy: Bangladesh Perspective

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**Abstract :** *This paper attempts to place Local Self Government (LSG) and Democracy in analytical perspective. It is pointed out that LSG is a major component that plays a crucial role to strengthen democracy in a country. LSG institutions are significant breeding grounds for democracy. It has been understood by the academicians and the policy planners that for democratic development there is no alternative to LSG. It helps the rural people understand democratic spirit and values. By taking part in local bodies the people can taste the fruit of democracy. Success of democracy mostly depends on the successful working of LSG. Moreover, the democracy cannot succeed until it is built on the foundation from grass root levels. That is the reason why LSG is well known as the best school for democratic education. In a developing but democratic countries like Bangladesh, LSG has great significant in promoting democracy. Unfortunately for us that despite have a 35 years of its existence, LSG is confronted with some chronic problems. As a result, the LSG has failed to grow as viable institution to play positive role for the promotion of democracy in Bangladesh. The article also considers the existing LSG system and its problems and prospects regarding democratic development in Bangladesh.*

### Introduction

According to Lord Bryce, “the best school for democracy and the best guarantee for its success in the practice of Local Self Government”<sup>1</sup>. It is generally recognized that the local institutions constitute the school for democracy. Success of democracy largely depends on the successful working of Local Self Government (LSG). National democracy will be success only when the LSG will function successfully and effectively. It can be said that without a sound system of democracy at the base levels,

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democracy and form of Government cannot have firm roots at the apex, LSG helps people understood democratic spirit and values, the art of managing things for themselves and ultimately the democratic way of life.

Bangladesh is a newly independent unitary state; it achieved her independence in 1971 through a nine month long liberation struggle. Local Self Government is an integral part of the central government of Bangladesh. Despite it's long existence, LSG in Bangladesh is confronted with some chronic problems. As a result, the units have failed to grow as viable institution to render democratic education properly to the people living in local levels in Bangladesh.

The paper is organized as follows: section II presents the meaning and content of Local Self Government, section III provides the meaning and content of Democracy, section IV presents the importance of LSG in promoting democracy as a critical analysis, section V provides the historical back ground of LSG in Bangladesh, section VI presents an evaluation of LSG in strengthening democracy in Bangladesh, finally some concluding remarks are given in section VII.

## **II. Local Self Government: its meaning and content**

Decentralization is essential for the successful working of democracy. Louis Allen opined that the transference of power from the central to the local level of government unit is called decentralization. For the proper administration of the state functions, decentralization of administration is essential and the Local Self Government is the creation of the process of decentralization<sup>2</sup>.

Local Self Government is the representative body, elected by the local people for a particular period. The United Nations Organization (UNO) defines LSG in the following way: "the term Local Self Government refers to a political subdivision of a nation or a state which is constituted by law and has substantial control over local affairs, including the powers to impose taxes or exact labor for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or locally selected"<sup>3</sup>.

Indian statutory commission of 1930 opines that, "Local Self Government is a representative organization, responsible to a body of electors, enjoying the power of taxation and the functioning both as a school of training responsibilities and the vital link in the chain of organizations that make up the government of the country"<sup>4</sup>. L. Golding has given the simplest definition of Local Self Government. To him, "LSG is the management of their own affairs by the people of locality"<sup>5</sup>.

Unlike the definition of democracy by Abraham Linkon, LSG is a government of the local people, by the local people and for the local people. It is not the subordinate unit of the central or provincial governments formed for mere administrative purposes. Moreover, it is an integral part of the government created for self-government within its competence.

### **III. Democracy: its meaning and content**

The term democracy has been defined by the Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English as "(state practicing) government by the people, direct or representative: the politically unprivileged the concept as a form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people collectively and is administered by them or by officers appointed by them: by the common people: a state of society characterized by recognition of equality of rights and privileges: political, social or legal equality: in the U.S. the democratic party"<sup>6</sup>.

Commenting on Democracy, Allan Bullock observes that democracy is no longer direct but indirect i.e. through the election of representatives; hence the term representative democracy. The criteria of democracy are therefore (a) whether such elections are free i.e., whether they are held frequently and periodically, whether the every citizen has the right to vote, whether candidates and parties are free to campaign in opposition to government of the day, and whether the voter is protected against intimidation by the secrecy of the ballot; (b) whether such elections provide an effective choice i.e., whether the choice of the electors is not limited to a single party, and whether a majority vote against the government in power leads to change of government; (c) whether the elected body of representatives variously known as parliament,



congress, national assembly has the right to legislation, the right to vote taxes and control the budget and the right publicly to question, discuss, criticize and oppose government measures without being subject to threats of interference or arrest<sup>7</sup>.

Allan Ball has identified the following features of liberal democratic system:

1. There is more than one political party competing for political power.
2. The competition for power is open, not secretive and is based on established and accepted forms of procedure.
3. Entry and recruitment to positions of political power are relatively open.
4. There are periodic elections based on universal franchise.
5. Pressure groups are able to operate to influence government decision. Association such as trade unions and other voluntary organizations are not subject to close government control.
6. Civil liberties, such as freedom of speech, religion, freedom from arbitrary arrest, are recognized and protected within the political system. This assumes that there is substantial amount of independence and freedom from government control of the mass media, i.e. radio, television, newspapers.
7. There is some form of separation of powers, i.e. a representative assembly has some form of control over the executive and the judiciary is independent of both executive and legislation<sup>8</sup>.

So, democracy is a form of government, in which people is the supreme authority as a whole rather than any section, or class or interest group within it. As a result of the fact, we can conclude our conceptual discussion of recognized definition of Abraham Linkon regarding democracy, "democracy is the government, of the people, by the people, and for the people".

#### **IV. Importance of LSG in Promoting Democracy: A Critical Analysis**

LSG institutions are the significant unit, for the promotion of democracy. They are committed to assist the people for learning democratic values in many respects.



LSG provides the people opportunities to taste the fruit of freedom and participation. The people generally are more interested in the participation in LSG bodies. They can directly participate in the local bodies in large scale. LSG also work as a training complex of the national leaders. Ernest observes, "LSG offers many excellent opportunities for the training of the man and women who may later lead the country in bigger affairs of the national and world politics"<sup>9</sup>. Success of democracy largely depends on the successful functioning of LSG. While addressing at the first National Conference of LSG, Jhoro Lal Nehru, the late prime minister of India said, "LSG is and must be the basis of true system of democracy. The democracy may not succeed until it is built on the foundation from below"<sup>10</sup>.

LSG is educative both for the electors and the elected. Educative value largely depends upon the spirit of the local self governing institutions. Political education is the major part of LSG. If LSG does not work democratically, the central government can never be democratic. Democracy at the centre can work in a better way only if there is a corresponding system of democracy at the local level. No national democracy will have sound footing without grass root democracy. Discussing about the importance of LSG in democracy, C.D.H Cole has opined that democracy is nothing unless it means, in the last resort, letting the people have their own way, not only in the mass, by means of an aggregate vote in a nation-wide scale, but also in their lesser groups and societies of which the great societies are made up<sup>11</sup>. So, practice of democracy is the part and parcel of LSG of any state.

## **V. LSG in Bangladesh: A brief historical perspective**

Bangladesh has the longest tradition of Local Self Government. The existing LSG of Bangladesh has come to the present form through a gradual process of evolution. The roots of LSG can be traced to as far back as the British rule in the Indian subcontinent. The introduction of LSG in the country had all along been an idea from the *Chowkidari Panchayat Act* of 1871<sup>12</sup>. Lord Ripon for the first time had taken initiative for the introduction of LSG in the history of British India. As part of his initiative, he issued a resolution on LSG. The aim of the resolution was to develop these

bodies in order to provide opportunities for training the people in the art of self government. Since then, there were a number of acts taken by the British government for the development of LSG in the Indian subcontinent. The Bengal Local Self Government Act III of 1885 to 1919, the Bengal Village Self Government Act V of 1919 to 1947 was among them<sup>13</sup>. After the independence of Pakistan in 1947, the structure of LSG remained the same till 1956. The system of LSG changed radically with the introduction of the Basic Democracies (BD) by president Ayub Khan in 1959. Under Basic Democracies system, a four tier system of LSG was introduced in East Pakistan<sup>14</sup>. After the emergence of independent Bangladesh in 1971, BD, the system of LSG as existed during Pakistan, was dissolved by a presidential order (order no.7) in 1972<sup>15</sup>.

Another order from the president changed the name and structure of *Union Panchayat* and it was named as the *Union Parishad*. At the end of Mujib Regime, military administration had brought few structural and functional changes of LSG bodies through two military government ordinances.

During Ershad regime, a few changes/couple of changes were made into the existing structure of LSG bodies. By presidential orders, Thana administration and Upazila were introduced in 1982 and in 1983 respectively. As per ordinance, it was consisted of one elected chairman, representative members, official members and nominated members. Upazila Nirbahi Officer was act as secretary and coordinator among different departments of the upazila. Term of the *Upazila Parishad* was five years. In 1991 it was brought to an end. Though an act was passed in parliament in 1998 for reintroduction of *Upazila Parishad* but it could not sustain.

Local Government (UP) ordinance had also brought a considerable change in the composition and functions of *Union Parishad*. As per that ordinance, UP was consisted of one elected chairman, nine elected female members. Each UP was divided into three wards. Three members were elected from a single ward. At last, Local Government (UP) Act 1997 provided an opportunity for the female members to be elected directly by the local electors. As per this act, UP is divided into nine wards. Now a single person is elected from a single ward.



*Gram Sarker* act was promulgated in February 27, 2003 during the period of four party alliance government led by BNP. As per the act, *Gram Sarker* shall be formed in each ward of *Union Parishad*. It will consist of 15 members. Member of each ward of *Union Parishad* will be the head of *Gram Sarker*. It will be a supportive unit of *Union Parishad*. It will assist accelerating *Union Parishad*'s functions more effective.

As part of urban local governance, *Pourasava* ordinance was promulgated in 1977. It consists of a chairman, commissioners, and female commissioners from reserved seats. Right now, there are six city corporations in Bangladesh. Each corporation is consists of a mayor as head and elected commissioners. All they are directly elected by the voters. Each female commissioner is elected by the voters from a constituency consist of three wards.

## **VI. Local Self Government and Democracy in Bangladesh : An Evaluation**

LSG is an integral part of the central government in Bangladesh. LSG contributes to the strengthening of democratic culture in number of ways.

The stability, performance and structural continuity of LSG are mostly dependent upon the policy and stability of the government at the centre. Despite the long existence of LSG in Bangladesh, till today it is confronted with some chronic problems. As a result it could not play effective role to promote democracy. Moreover those constraints relating to LSG impinge upon the success of democracy in Bangladesh. Among them some notable obstacles are as under

**1<sup>st</sup>:** The historical account of LSG of Bangladesh shows that the successive governments felt obliged to establish some kind of the local government structure in order to mobilize support of the rural communities in their favor through providing a little bit of welfare measures. This is the reason why LSG could not function properly to provide opportunities for the people irrespective of party affiliation to participate in the development activities of it.

**2<sup>nd</sup>:** The colonial pattern of administration in LSG is characterized by elitist and alienated nature. Administrative officials working at



different level are mainly bureaucratic in orientation and alienated from the people. Therefore, people cannot take part in different activities of LSG properly/ actively in Bangladesh.

**3<sup>rd</sup>:** The most serious obstacles in the way of democratic education by LSG remain the weakness of its socio-economic base. The non-egalitarian economic structure tends to control the local bodies by pro-partied class. They often tend to suit their class interest and purposes. As a result, LSG cannot render proper services to the people at local level. Beside, general people do not dare to work with LSG for the presence of local elite.

**4<sup>th</sup>:** Factional attitude of the people is responsible for the less effectiveness of LSG in Bangladesh. In rural Bangladesh, there are bitter experiences regarding factional politics that jeopardizes the successful working of LSG. It remains as a major impediment of proper popular participation in local level elections. Such attitude pushes the loser candidates and their supporters in a conflicting situation in post local election. As a result, they do not intend to cooperate with the winner candidates and for that the very functioning of elected council remains problematic.

**5<sup>th</sup>:** Politico-administrative contradictions often disrupt the very functioning of LSG units. Administrative wing of the LSG often expects that political leaders should work under their supervision due to their technical expertise. On the other hand, local representatives claim that they are able to work for the development of the people as they can understand problems and find out solutions. Such kind of contradictions always hampers the structural and functional continuity of LSG and therefore people representatives can not serve the interest of local people. Moreover, local people can not provide any sort of inputs in decision making process for their welfare.

**6<sup>th</sup>:** Since the very beginning of its evolution, the units are being used by both the party in power and the opposition for their narrow political ends. Beside, the national political activities in different ways are foisted upon the grassroots level units. As a result, people at local level divide in political line and they do not get lesion of cooperation and coexistence unlike the national politics prevailing in Bangladesh.

**7<sup>th</sup>:** Patron-client relationship also responsible for the less effective role of LSG in democratic development. In Rural Bangladesh patron decides the will of political participation of the client and such trend keeps the vast majority portion apolitical at the local level.

**8<sup>th</sup>:** Education is one of the major components of political participation. Unfortunately, despite have 35 years of existence of Bangladesh as an independent country her majority people are illiterate. Among them, most of the people living the local areas have no idea about the significance of LSG in strengthening democracy.

**9<sup>th</sup>:** Women constitute half of the total population in Bangladesh. But they are in backward position due to their ignorance. A number of barriers are responsible for their backwardness such as poor rate of literacy, myths, religious sanction, and patriarchal society above all government negligence and so on.

**10<sup>th</sup>:** *Union Parishad* has an important role to play in local level planning for Development. But due to absence of proper coordination between local government and central government, UP could not contribute much towards local level planning. Moreover, absence of autonomy of LSG is responsible for that weakness.

**11<sup>th</sup>:** State of local leadership is not satisfactory in terms of their quality. In absence of proper practice of democracy within local government bodies, local leadership could not emerge as a liable, capable and self motivated body.

In the backdrop of such a condition of LSG system to strengthen democracy in Bangladesh, there are some positive outlooks are observed. These are mentioned below:

- (1) Regular basis election.
- (2) Women direct representation.
- (3) Increasing the rate of people's participation in local elections.
- (4) Increasing the tendency of the people to participate in different level of development activities of LSG.
- (5) Increasing the rate of literacy.

- (6) Expansion of the activities of NGOs and their pro vital role to socio-economic development of women at local level.
- (7) Expansion of the mass and electronic media at the grass root level

## VII. Concluding Remarks

What becomes very clear from the above discussion is that LSG is on one of the most important ground of democracy. Any program of LSG is very significant contributor to democratic development of the state. It has been understood by the academics and the policy planners that for democratic development there is no alternative to LSG. The existing LSG system in Bangladesh is not sound and effective enough to promote democracy. Moreover, this institution is facing some prolong and profound problems. As a result of which it has failed to render it service for the development of democracy. The government should be committed to bring about the structural and qualitative changes into the existing LSG bodies. Beside, the political party in power and the opposition should rethink about the significance of LSG for strengthening democracy and for that they must not use it for their narrow political ends. As peoples outlook in our country is fatalistic and their consciousness about their way of political life is very limited the reason why there is no alternative to the spread of education. Education is the way of political awareness. Hence, our civil society, media, NGOs must be more active in making the education a social movement and make the people aware of it.

In fine, it is thus imperative to find proper ways and strategies for LSG in by that people at the local level of the country will become more political and contribute to the institutionalization of democracy.



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