CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Bangladesh is a country situated in the delta of the Ganges-Brahmaputra rivers. Its geographical location is between $20^034'$ and $26^038'$ north latitude, and $88^001'$ and $92^041'$ east longitude.

The land is potentially fertile, "The combination of rich delta soil, abundant water supply by three major rivers and a semi-tropical climate have, over the centuries, sustained simple but self-sufficient agrarian communities in Bangladesh".\(^1\)

It is one of those countries of the Third World which has a high population-density and also widespread poverty.\(^2\) Its 110 million people have only 143,998 sq. kms. to live on, which means that 764 persons have to adjust in one kilometre of land. This makes it one


\(^2\) Bangladesh Recent Economic Development and Medium Term Prospect, World Bank, 1986, Vols. 1-2, p.1
of the most densely populated countries. The overall economic condition of Bangladesh cannot be claimed to be sound. The total foreign aid disbursement during the fiscal year 1988 was 1.67 billion US Dollar.

A comparison between the urban and rural areas of Bangladesh would show a sharp difference in development. Village areas are least developed. Every development scheme taken so far seems quite insufficient to bring any significant change in the quality of life of the rural people.

More than 60% of the people are below poverty level in Bangladesh. Statistics provided by the World Bank put the per capita annual income at about 140 U.S. Dollars, making the country probably the poorest, next

3. In 1980, The population-density of Bangladesh was 605 per square kilometre. This is more than double of the ratio of thickly populated European countries like Belgium and the Netherlands with dimensions of 319 and 349 per sq. km. respectively. Bangladesh Economic and Social Development Prospects, World Bank, 1985, Vols.1-4, p.4.

4. Asia, Year Book 1988, P.98.
only to Ethiopia, Cambodia and Chad. Rural Bangladesh presents even a more acute picture of poverty and what is worse, more than 90% of the country's poor live there. Health, shelter, education, security and leisure are not at the satisfactory level. People in its villages cannot even make both ends meet.

The picture of rural areas in the field of education is far from satisfactory. Only 23.8% percent of the whole population is literate. But the rate of literacy in villages is even much less. It was 17% in 1981, as against 35% in the urban areas.

The attendance in the primary and secondary educational institutions in rural areas is much lower in comparison to urban areas due to the poor economic condition of the village people. Because of the socio-economic factor even the free primary educational facilities are not fully utilized in the rural areas. The number of rural enrolled students per school was 174, whereas that was 213 in urban areas.9

Health services in the country is also very poor, and this, even from third-world country standards. There is extreme disproportion between the number of doctors and hospital-beds available.10 And what is actually available is unfortunately urban-based. The rural areas are largely ignored and left to tend themselves. It is indeed a grim situation, as about 200,000 upazila population are attended by only 6 to 7 doctors. Of course,


financial contraints prevent the poor villagers from approaching to private practitioners. They too, can hardly attend to such a big population.

What is still more unfortunate that this large population goes on growing, making the country one of the most densely populated in the world. The present growth rate in Bangladesh is estimated at 2.4%, and if this rate continues unchecked, it shall stand at 130 million by the turn of the century.\textsuperscript{11} This will further deteriorate the already miserable socio-economic condition of the country. The greater sufferer again is rural Bangladesh, for the population growth there is indeed highly alarming. The urban people are literate and consequently plan families. In the villages, people are poor as well as illiterate and the birth rate is very high, for family planning is rarely practised. Efforts and initiatives to enthuse the village folk to have planned families have yet to show possible results.

\textsuperscript{11} Asia, Year Book 1988, p.98.
Now, agriculture is the most vital sector in Bangladesh. About one half of the GDP comes from the sector and 85% of the country's labour force is engaged in agriculture and accounts for 49% of the GDP (1983), providing about half of the national budget and nearly all export-revenue. Agricultural growth then is the basic determining factor of the income of rural people. And it is indeed unfortunate that no development of any worthwhile significance is noticed in this sector, for the methods and modes of cultivation have, by and large, remained traditional and obsolete. Scientific technology and modern inputs are hardly noticeable anywhere. Thus, tractors, power-tillers, chemical fertilizers, high yielding variety (HYV) seeds, pesticides, herbicides and irrigation facilities are, if ever, very rarely employed. Added to this are natural calamities like floods, droughts which also quite often affect the normal growth of agricultural products. All these factors together cause agricultural output to remain static and therefore miserably fail to meet the ever growing needs of an increasing population.

These shortcomings apart the infrastructure too, is meagre. Thus, roads, postal services and transport which have great bearing upon development are insufficient. What is more, clean potable water or even electricity is unthinkable in many a village.

It has become imperative to take necessary steps for rapid rural development, otherwise nation as a whole shall not be able to become self-reliant. The rural sector contributes two-thirds of GNP and therefore, if this sector is neglected and development is confined only to the smaller urban part, the total economy of the country will be severely affected. It is evident that for most of the developing countries like Bangladesh, rural development is a pre-requisite for an overall national development.

However, rural development is variously interpreted. In an agrarian society rural development means an increase in percapita income in the rural areas, particularly in agricultural sector and marginally in the sector of cottage industries. It is a "fundamental process of political, economic and social transformation of
agrarian societies in which the main actors are the majority members of the society". The World Bank Publication defines rural development as a strategy designed to improve the living standard of the low income population residing in rural areas. The Bangladesh Planning Commission interprets rural development as an improvement in the quality of life of the rural people and the process would involve the development of both economic and social sectors, the former with infrastructure, production, employment and income, and the latter with education, health, sanitation and family planning etc. The theme of rural development has become multidisciplinary like agriculture, education, health and nutrition, consumption including housing, food and such services like water-supply, electricity, transportation,

13. This definition is given by Obaidullah Khan, quoted in 'Syndicate Report of Rural Poverty Alleviation in Bangladesh', Third Senior Staff Course, Group-B, Savar, Dhaka, BPATC, March, 1986. p.15,


entertainment, police and fire-protection and so forth.¹⁶

Now, the question may arise how rural development, which in brief means socio-economic progress in rural areas, can be achieved. It is found that a number of government and non-government organizations, as well as local self-governing institutions are involved to carry out development programmes in this field in different countries of the world. In Bangladesh, there are two categories of local self-government, urban and rural. The thesis will incorporate only the discussion on the role of rural local self-government. This is directly concerned with the rural development through democratic means. Direct involvement of the beneficiaries, through the institution of local self-government has a greater vitality than any other mechanism. Local self-government has been defined variously. According to Stones, local self-government is that part of the government of a country which deals with those matters concerning the

people living in a particular territory. Clarke, too, appears to be in agreement with this, of course, the only thing he added was the desirability of administration by local authorities who were subordinated to the central government. Similarly, the *Encyclopaedia of Social Sciences* presupposes the existence of a local authority, authorized to decide and administer a limited range of public policies, within a relatively small territory, which is a sub-division, of a regional or national government. The explanation of the term as developed by the United Nations is that its governing body may be elected or otherwise locally selected and it has substantial control of local affairs including the power to impose taxes or extract labour for this purpose.


In the light of above definitions it can be said that the best solution of local problems can be evolved by the local self-governing organizations as each and every problem of the locality is well-known to them. Local self-government being representative institutions, can see the interest, needs and grievances of the people more sympathetically because of their direct concern. And they also realize their direct accountability to the people as most of the members are elected. No other institution has that much concern of public opinion.

Local self-government is, indeed, the foundation of a responsible government.\textsuperscript{21} It helps democratic ideals to flourish and creates political awareness among citizens about their rights and duties. It also stresses toleration as well as respect for the opinion of others, which is the essence of democracy.\textsuperscript{22} The system helps people to participate in a local democratic set up, wherein they have a right to choose their own representatives, or, even

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put themselves up as candidates, or, just be a part of the
electioneering process. All these equip them with
political wisdom; and through trial and error, they learn
to manage their own affairs. This process, thus, ensures
the scope of popular participation at grassroot level—a
practice through which democracy can effectively be
achieved to a desirable extent. These bodies also
contribute to the creation of leadership. Competent and
experienced persons are attracted to render service, and
this in turn throws up a band of experienced and tested
leadership at local level.  

These organizations help rural people to become
articulate about their local conditions, which a central
agency can hardly even gather or even deal with.
Identification of general priorities in development
programmes and determination of policies under particular

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23. From some British studies, it is revealed that
substantial percentages of both Labour and Conservative
MPs were members of their local government councils
before being elected MPs, cf. L. Feldman & Goldrick,
circumstances could easily be done by these institutions. They also ensure proper planning and efficient utilization of resources available. These institutions also help a speedy mobilization of local resources.

In many countries, local self-government plays very active role in the economic development of the rural area. In Yugoslavia, this involvement is both agricultural and industrial. And in India, multifarious tasks of rural development in almost all spheres are given to the charge of rural local self-government. These bodies oversee agricultural development like the procurement of seeds and fertilizer, and minor irrigation, small industries, transport and communication, health, education and other welfare schemes. In a developed country like Britain, local self-government greatly contributes towards the development of the rural community. This includes an all-around responsibility, which covers a whole range of

functions including socio-economic cultural and environmental upkeep of the concerned locality. In short, British local self-government performs a wide range of functions which affect both industry, commerce as well as citizens.25

In Bangladesh also, the local self-governing institutions could play a vital role for the improvement of the lot of the millions of the poverty-stricken rural people.

Research, till date has covered certain areas of local self-government in Bangladesh. But a comprehensive study on local self-governing bodies including evaluation of their role in rural development has yet to come. The thesis is a humble attempt to fulfil that objective.

In the present set up there exists a three-tier system of rural local self-government in Bangladesh, of

which the middle tier, i.e., Upazila (Sub-district) Parishad is the most significant. That is why, a special stress would be given to evaluate the role of Upazila Parishad in rural development.

An important part of the thesis is based on empirical study. Three upazilas from three divisions of the country have been surveyed in order to ascertain the correct picture of rural development particularly after the introduction of decentralization policy in 1982. The concerned office-records have also been examined. Upazila officials, as well as national experts have been interviewed. The opinions of the local elites, and also the beneficiaries of the development programmes have been taken through interviews and informal discussions.

Apart from Introduction, the First Chapter, the thesis consists of five other chapters. Chapter Second deals with the historical background of local self-government i.e., its evolution during the British and Pakistan periods. The Third Chapter covers existing system of local self-government in Bangladesh, and the changes and development that have taken place in the local bodies
since the independence of Bangladesh. The Fourth Chapter deals with the role of local self-government especially, *Upazila Parishad*, in the rural development of Bangladesh. In the Fifth Chapter, a comparative study with the Indian system has been made. The Sixth and Last Chapter will be the conclusion of the thesis.