

***Samaj* : Existence of an Informal Organization under the Auspices of National Politics**

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Abstract

Bangladesh is passing through a transitional period having changes in various aspects of its rural life and, keeping pace with it, it is quite obvious that the political situation of the country will also have similar changes. *Being constituted of mainly peasant societies*, Bangladesh has its own political framework in its social system. *Samaj* is the main social institution in rural Bangladesh. Traditionally, villagers group themselves into and are guided by different *samaj*. Before independence, except the period of election, national politics rarely had any major influence on the formation and activities of the *samaj*. But it has been documented after independence that the rural politics in Bangladesh has encompassed its boundary from village level to national context. In this paper, we will find the interaction between local and national level politics that does exist in the *samaj* framework. This paper will, thus, explore the dynamics of these structural changes.

I. Introduction and objective of the study

The objective of this paper is to identify the recent change of the political situation at the local level of Bangladesh. The situations have been investigated in a village, named Rupsa. It is a village of Fulki union of Basail Thana of Tangail district and is located straight 8km east from Tangail. This empirical data have been collected through participant observation in 1998.

There are two clear power domains in the villages of Bangladesh. One is the *samaj*- an indigenous social-organization. The other domain encompasses local government organizations e.g., Union Parishad (UP), gram sarkar (village government) and co-operative societies. The leaders who run the UP and different types of cooperatives are termed

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as formal leaders (Karim: 1990:14) .In Rupsa, informal social organization *samaj* and formal organization Union Parishad hold all necessary power to administer a rural society. The main focus of this study is to explore the impact of national level politics on *samaj* groups.

Review of literature

It is clear from various studies (Bertocci, 1970; Islam, 1974; Jahangir, 1979; Thorp, 1977; Arens and Van Beurden 1977, Karim, 1990) that in Bangladesh local government and traditional *samaj* institution work conjointly at the village politics besides national level politics. Peter j Bertocci, in his doctoral dissertation entitled "Elusive Village: Social Structure and community organization in Rural East Pakistan" (1970) writes that the *samaj* to which Hajipur and Tinpara belong, consists of 8 mouzas in which 14 sardars formally exercise leadership in their respective reyai. The main role of *samaj* is to mediate all types of "atomistic" and "factional" conflict. He writes that a process of change in the power structure is occurring. The members of the land rich lineage are traditionally the power wielders and the leaders at the intra-village level.

In another book entitled, "The Politics of community and culture in Bangladesh" (1996), Bertocci writes, "There are several ways in which samaj groups as power domains may be seen to operate at levels of articulation with other. Firstly, of course, they confront official units of administration, law and order, sometimes in resistance, other times in cooperation, and some contact between official agencies of law and government and the indigenous social control system occurs precisely because there is no organization other than the samaj below the lowest tier in the administrative hierarchy of government. *Samaj* groups are central to the indigenous judicial system, and minimal samaj units links to maximal ones as their various leaders combine and recombine in the formation of councils for the arbitration of disputes (*salishi*) and the judgement (*bichar*) of offenders of the peace.....The solidarities and segmentation of samaj groups play a role in the local government elections as well" (Bertocci: 1996, pp-30-31).

A.K.M. Aminul Islam studied the political process of Bangladesh village and related it to the process of change in the wider community.

Politics within a changing village remain in many ways the same always. To him, politics is composed of small political units, which are connected to the people by kinship, friendship and sect line (Islam 1974:p-163). A.H.M. Zehadul Karim (1990) in his book 'The Pattern of Rural leadership in an agrarian society' explains that Leadership in Bangladesh for over a century has been enacted through the institution of samaj. *Samaj* is an informal political organization organized along kinship lines within adjacent localities. Land rich-persons from important lineage's become the leaders of samaj. He examines in depth the traditional political structures of Dhononjoypara and Gopalhati in Puthia union of Rajshahi districts.

Eric Jansen wrote about samaj, "A *samaj* is an institution which is vested primarily with the task of ensuring that people conform to a morally proper mode of conduct. The *samaj* has the authority to inflict punishments on people who deviate from the established norms." (Jansen: 1987, p-86) He again wrote about the *samaj* institution of Bhaimara village, "In Bhaimara there is only one *samaj*, but this *samaj* also contains 6 to 7 households from two neighbouring villages who live on the boundaries of Bhaimara village.....Twice since the Partiton (in 1947) the *samaj* has split into different factions, but after some years it has been reunited. The 'official' reason for the split both times was that members of the samaj had entered into marriages with partners which some *samaj* members approved and some did not." (Jansen: 1987, pp, 86-87) We observe here that *samaj* has been formed without any formal recognition and may be broken for such a trivial incident.

II. The *Samaj* , The local Government and the national level politics: A case study of Rupsa

Samaj is a Bengali word. It has different meanings including people, sangha (group), or institution. This word is generally used to refer to clustered homesteads within a village, which act like a group. The local or neighbourhood groupings of homesteads and the togetherness of the people of these homesteads in the rural Bangladesh are called *samaj* . According to K.M. Asraful Aziz - "The *samaj* pattern is taken as the basic frame of reference for social activities. The *samaj* has the authority to award or punishment if anyone deviates from the established social norms. Every individual is conscious about the

controlling authority of *samaj*. Social control of individuals who are involved in activities against the social and religious tradition of the society is an important function of the *samaj*. From area to area the *samaj* pattern varies from highly cohesive to loosely informal." (Aziz: 1979: p-26).

The word '*samaj*' has been used for many purposes in Bangladesh. Karim (1990, p -92) shows that two factors determine the *samaj* composition: Kinship affiliation and Territoriality. Kinship affiliation is evident in the *gosthi* membership, and territoriality is decided by ascertaining the families living in a particular neighborhood where that particular *samaj* is formed. (Karim: 1990, pa: 92). The main work of *samaj* institution is to control the rules and norms of the society. There may exist two or three *samaj* institutions in a village. *Samaj* is a traditional institution that have gone through changes over the years. Prior to the partition of the sub-continent in 1947, the *panchayat* system was operative in the region. But the system has now been abolished in Rupsa. *Samaj* is no more organized on the basis of prominence and influence of any lineage here. The charisma, wealth, education of the leaders and the impact of national politics on the formal local government influenced much to originate *samaj* groups. Sometimes a *samaj* is based on a particular *para*¹, bearing the concept at its core that all the people of a particular *para* are the members of that *samaj*. In these cases influential *gosthi* members and the elder persons act as the leader of the *samaj*. But, in Rupsa.

There are two main *samaj* groups, under which all political activities are performed. These two *samaj* groups are: Dewaan Malik *samaj* and Chairman *samaj*. These two *samaj* groups did not emerge on the basis of kin relationships. They were with a view to acquiring power in local level politics. Md. Jalaluddin is the leader of the Dewaan Malik *samaj*. He is an active worker of Bangladesh Awami league, one of the main political parties in the country. Md. Fariduddin is the leader of the chairman *samaj*. He is the former chairman of the Fulki Union Parishad, to which Rupsa belongs. Politically Mr. Fariduddin is associated with Bangladesh Nationalist Party. The antagonism between the leaders of these two *samaj* has been existed for longtime.

Here, we will see that, the functions of the samaj are now merging with those of the national level politics in Rupsa. '*Samaj*' is a traditional social institution of rural Bangladesh. Having linkage with the national politics, the function of this institution has in the recent past become very complicated in Rupsa. The leaders play a powerful role here. First we will discuss the role of Md. Fariduddin(54) who was the chairman of Fulki union under Basail thana (there are six unions in Basail thana) from 1973 to 1984 for two terms. He is now the headmaster of a high school of an adjacent village and owner of 3-acres cultivable land. Once he was the only graduate of Rupsa. So all the people of the village honored him and all the welfare affairs of the village came under his supervision. Then there was only one *samaj* organization in the village that was 'the chairman *samaj*'. All the village people came to him in all necessities. But the popularity of Md. Fariduddin decreased from 1984. There were many accusations against him. The villagers complained that he stole the relief materials and harassed illiterate people, which created dissatisfaction among the villagers. As a result he failed to be elected chairman for the third time in the union parishad election of 1984. At present, although he is no more the chairman, he exercises the power as if he were. Most of the villagers do not like him but they pretend that he is their leader. Sometimes they are forced to follow him. It is an established idea among the villagers that he is a pawky person and an autocratic power holder. He is an active worker of the BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) and is, now-a-days, propagating the ideal of this party within his *samaj* and among his followers. Members of his *samaj* are the followers of the BNP.

Under this situation many of the villagers wanted a change, in the arena of the local level power structure. With this aim Md. Jalaluddin formed a new *samaj* under the banner of another national political power stream- Awami league. Md. Jalaluddin is a service holder in a private company named Homeland Insurance. He is also a graduate and owner of 4.4-acres of cultivable land. Being an educated and rich man of the village, Md. Jalaluddin holds some power over the villagers. But he is not the only leader of Dewaan Malik *samaj*. Some educated members of his *samaj* also enjoys the status of leadership and exercises power sometimes to a significant extent.

The four leaders of the Dewaan Malik *samaj* are:

1. Md. Jalaluddin Dewaan(32), a graduate, non-government service holder.
2. Md. Safiq Ahmed (34), a graduate, teacher of a high school.
3. Md .Rafiq Ahmed (32), a graduate, teacher of ai high school.
4. Md. SohrabKhan-(30), H.S.C pass , rich man.

There are 419 households in Rupsa. Among them 150 families belong to the Dewaan Malik *samaj* and the rest 100 families of the village are the members of the chairman *samaj*. Usually the household heads of these families go to their leader in times of crisis. A different view has been found among the Hindus of this village. The Hindus do not like Md. Fariduddin but superficially support him. They say that they are minority and comparatively helpless, so frequently they are harassed by the powerful people, especially by the musclemen of Md. Fariduddin. Sometimes they are threatened of grabbing land by these musclemen. So they support Mr. Fariduddin orally to escape the immediate risk but do not cast vote for him. There also have been found an interesting existence of some sub-*samaj* groups within these two groups. These are formed on the basis of kinship and territoriality. There are six *paras* in Rupsa. Among these *paras* two different *samaj* groups can be identified. These sub-*samaj* groups always keep a close connection with the main *samaj* groups of the village. These groups are: Goalpara *samaj* and Khalifa para *samaj*.

i *Goalpara samaj* : It is the southern part of the village. There are two subgroups in *Goalpara Samaj*.

i. (a) *Tofajjal mia* Group and

i. (b) *Badsa mia* group.

All of the problems in the *para* are solved by Md.Tofajjal Mia and Md.Badsa Mia. But there are also divisions between these two groups. Tofazzal Mia belongs to Chairman *samaj* and Badsa Mia belongs to Dewaan Malik *samaj*. When a problem becomes very serious then they refer it to Md. Fariduddin and Md. Jalaluddin Dewaan.

- ii. *Khalifa para samaj* : In the west portion of Rupsa, there is a *para* where lived only tailors (kalifa). The members of this *para* meet their problems with the recommendation of their powerful leader Md. Mirza Rased and Md. Mirza khaleq. But Mirza Raseed and Mirza Khaleq follow two different leaders, i.e., Md. Fariduddin and Mirza Khaleq, respectively.

Recently a new *samaj* has emerged in Rupsa. Abul Sikder is the leader of this *samaj*. He is a businessman and lives at Goalpara. Although Abul Sikder is a supporter of Awami league, he established the new *samaj* out of his own interest.

***Samaj* , as a rural socio-political institution:**

The aims and objectives of the *samaj* institutions are many. The *samaj* is not formally recognized by the government, but is an informal corporate social organization, which has religious, ritual, ceremonial, and adjudicative functions. It also protects the norms and values of the village.

The first and foremost function of *samaj* is to control social activities. If anyone makes any social- crime, the members of *samaj* groups call *Salish*^{II} to punish him or to solve the problem. The eldest persons of the village can be the members of the *Salish* besides the regular members and workers of the *samaj* and political groups. The eldest members give their consent to the meeting. 50 years ago, there was the tradition of village Panchayat in this village. Now the tradition is abolished. From this point of view *samaj* is really the lowest tier in the administrative hierarchy of government.

Another important activity of the *samaj* group is to help the union parishad member or chairman to build schools, mosques, temples, graveyards etc. The members of the *samaj* group help the, poor people in the time of their daughter's matrimony. After one's death the members of the *samaj* group (to which the deceased person belonged) help the deceased family to bury the dead body and it is their duty to attend at *Namaz-e-zanaza* (A special prayer for the salvation of the departed soul). The members of the *samaj* group also performed a great role in the religious activities. It is a rule that every solvent

Muslim will sacrifice a four-footed animal during the *Eid-ul-azha*. After slaughtering the animal according to Muslim way, the flesh is divided into three divisions. Generally the villagers give one third of the total flesh to the *samaj* leader for distribution among the poor and needy people. Then flesh donated by the members of the *samaj* are gathered together and distributed by the *samaj* leader among the poor people of the village.

After the Eid prayer the Imam^{III} of the village urges the Muslim present in the Eidgah^{IV} to donate money for the welfare of the zummaghar^V. The members of the particular *samaj* give this money to their *samaj* leader. Later the leader gives all these money to the Imam. It has also a political importance. In this time everybody can recognize who belongs to which *samaj* and what his political identity is.

Members of the *samaj* group gather a fist of rice from every household once a week for the welfare of the mosque.

There are two mosques in this village, which are locally called zummaghar. One is Mia Bari Zummaghar and the other is Goalpara Zummaghar. A representative of a chairman *samaj* gathers fist of rice from every household for the Mia Bari zummaghar in every Friday, the weekly, special prayer day of the Muslims. After gathering rice and selling it to the market they create a welfare fund for the zummaghar. The *samaj* group helps the poor peasant from this welfare fund during costly social events like marriage and funerals. In this way *samaj* works as a helping institution.

The current union *parishad*^{VI} member is elected from the Dewaan Malik *samaj*. He only performs his official duties. The leaders of the Dewaan Malik *samaj* help and guide him in development and welfare activities for the villagers. Thus an informal traditional institution and the formally recognized state organization (i.e. union parishad) are conjointly working for the common goal of peace and prosperity. During the national parliamentary election of 1996, the members of the Dewaan Malik *samaj* canvassed lot for the Bangladesh Awami league candidate and the members of chairman *samaj* for BNP candidate. It is clear that the villagers of the Rupsa are very much conscious of the national level politics of Bangladesh.

The leaders of the *samaj* always influence their supporters to cast vote in favor of their preferred candidates. The two *samaj* groups always compete for gaining power and supremacy over the other. These *samaj* groups are under the umbrella of the two big political parties of the country. The members of the *samaj* group always keep an intimate relationship with the leaders of the national parties and with the Member of the Parliament of the locality. So it is clear that the villagers are no longer distant from the national level politics and *samaj* plays an important role in this regard. The role of a traditional institution like *samaj* with all its social, religious and cultural activities has also its political significance. Most of the time the traditional institutions are abolished when it loses its social functions and people's demand for it. But at Rupsa, the *samaj*, a traditional peasant institution, has over the years existed through strengthening its link with the state, participating in national level politics, and thus making its existence a necessity for this villagers.

Notes

- I. Territorial segmentations are found in the villages of Bangladesh. The place or a certain territory of a village, where a cluster of households is formed on the basis of close-knit neighborhood is called a para.
- II. Arbitration of disputes.
- III. Muslim Religious specialist
- IV. A central playground where the Muslims perform their Eid prayer.
- V. Mosque
- VI. parishad means council

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