

LOCAL KNOWLEDGE AND CONFLICT RESOLUTION IN RURAL COMMUNITIES OF BANGLADESH

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ABSTRACT: Conflicts may arise surrounding issues of natural resource management within rural communities in Bangladesh. In addition to rivalry among factions, conflicts emerge centering on issues of access to different resources. Although conflict is sometimes inevitable, local people hold certain knowledge that can help them resolve such conflicts at the community level. Development practitioners are currently developing various consensus-building models that relate to sustainable natural resource management in order to resolve community-level conflicts. These interventions by the outsiders are inadequate in many respects because they are based on limited insight into the concerned culture as well as they largely ignore local knowledge that is embedded. The responses of the communities toward conflict resolution need to be taken into account by the development practitioners if they intend to achieve a clearer understanding of the issues involved. This paper focuses on the above issues according to the experiences of the community members of Charan Village from Bangladesh.

Keywords: Conflict Resolution, Development, Local Knowledge, Natural Resource Management

1. INTRODUCTION

The conflict arises within the community in accessing natural resources in the *beel*¹ areas of Bangladesh. Often tension is evident among Muslim dominant social group called *Khan* and *Miah*, but however, *somaj*² has some mechanisms to minimize or to resolve the disputes in order to create harmony through a social institution called *shalish*³. Unfortunately all of the studies on *somaj* in Bangladesh have negatively viewed the role of *shalish* as far as rural power structure is concerned. The role of *shalish* related to the major attributes of *somaj* was highly criticized as in majority cases it was exploitative to the rural women. But in the process of doing so, it has blurred the significance of the role of *shalish* in arbitration in informal traditional societies. In many of the cases, it was evident that the leaders of *somaj* handled a conflicting situation smoothly through their local knowledge in an informal setting. They were able to resolve disputes between two families and even within the

¹ A *beel* is a natural lake-like depression that contains water during the monsoon and water level recedes during the lean period. It is connected with rivers through canals. A *beel* is a large natural body of water, which forms a lake (Bengalis conceive of rivers as stretched out water bodies). Some former land is seasonally submerged when the *beel* is flooded, whereas the rest of the land is always under water.

² Somaj stands for community. However, the notion of somaj in Bengali society is critical and different than the popular notion of community. The term is elaborated later in this article.

³ Shalish is a local understanding of the process of arbitrations. The term is elaborated later in the section under somaj.

members of the same family. The rural leaders have also undertaken development activities by maintaining a consensus within the community (De.Walt, 1994). They were able to construct new roads or pathways through the village or establish schools, mosques and temples by avoiding conflicts among different groups of stakeholders in the community. The strategies to minimise or to resolve conflict were in the form of an inner mechanism that was achieved by the *somaj* leaders through their life experiences (Sillitoe, 2000). Most of the leaders may not have any formal education but they rely on their local wisdom. They have cultural beliefs associated with religious rituals and cultural performances, which help them maintain peace and social equilibrium. This rural power structure was threatened by NGOs unintentionally, if not intentionally in recent times as these were considered to many as exploitative to the poor and a barrier to development (Sillitoe, 1998). In many cases, it has created a chaotic situation at the cost of social harmony in traditional societies. The NGOs like BRAC, Proshika, Gonoshahajjo Sangstha (GSS) formed organizations of people which were parallel to the local government at the *upazila*⁴ level as well as *somaj*. The lessons of *somaj* leaders were not explored and it was irrespectively generalised throughout the country that traditional rural leaders are a barrier to development. So, NGOs with international donor funding have tried to change the rural power structure ignoring its positive contributions. As a consequence, tension was created between state, NGOs and *somaj*. Gradually, the role of *somaj* has been deteriorating and been replaced by the formal local institutions. These have reinforced the notion of dysfunctions and conflicts between newly emerged individualistic values among the members of the community. The notion of harmony and equilibrium has been displaced and this has reduced people's notion of collective goal and of mutual support.

2. METHODOLOGY AND LOCATION OF THE STUDY

The study was conducted in a small scale ethnographic manner for a better comprehension of traditional village *somaj*, its function in the conflict resolution and the transformation of *somaj* into a more complex society. The location of the study is in Tangail district, the central region of the country. A number of villages including the *beel* areas have been incorporated in the study. In our study area, Charan *beel* is the biggest one compared to the neighbouring Laksmi Prasad *beel* and Alam Kha *beel*. Charan *beel* is famous and well known because of its resourcefulness as well as for the elegance, which attracts people to refresh their mind when they see the beautiful landscape. Besides, some previous studies were conducted on the same area, hence, the relevant aspects of indigenous knowledge (IK) are best reflected in this region, which may facilitate the understanding of conceptual and critical notions of cultural characteristics of Bangladeshi societies. Our main emphasis is given here on the *beel* areas as they are the centres of resources and on how the community people receiving those resources and using it as part of their livelihood.

⁴ Upazila, formerly called thana in Bengali, is a geographical region in Bangladesh used for administrative or other purposes. They function as sub-units of districts. Their functionality can be seen to be analogous to that of a county or a borough of Western countries.

3. THE NOTION OF SOMAJ AND ITS DYNAMICS

According to the local people a *somaj* is formed with the people from all religions, Hindu and Muslim in the most common forms, with some sort of unity among the members about their communal life. Some people think if more than hundreds of people in the village decide something regularly in a common forum, then it could be considered as a *somaj*. In our study area, we find *somaj* with its strong and less strong holds on the village considering the different issues of life. It is also determining the use of natural resource in some respect. The study area (particularly Agcharan and Pascharan) is very well in touch with the town and most of the villagers have influences upon the administration through their relatives from this village who are serving as the high officials in the government. We considered Agcharan and Pachcharan as the town influenced villages. We may agree with it till now regarding the communication or the facilities and availability of technologies which are rare to find in all other typical villages of Bengal. However, rural atmosphere has not changed too much following the other things. The influence of *bongsho*⁵ and their *shariqs*⁶ is still proving this notion. On the other hand, we can add that things are perhaps not the same as the previous practices but still *somaj* is trying to impose its wishes on the habitant of the village. So, we can look forward to *somaj* and its function regarding the past and present both.

The *somaj* used to run by the *murubbi*. The word *Murubbi* is used for the elderly people. But here when it is concerning the *somaj* itself, the meaning is changed. In *somaj*, *murubbi* means someone influential. So, there are several *murubbies* who are leading *somaj*. *Murubbies* are coming as the key persons of the *bongso* and *shariq*. They are not getting hold as the leader (*sarder*) of the *bongso* only, they must represent the powerful *bongso*, because their range of power and hold is determined by the respective prestige and privilege of their *bongso*, which they are representing. On the other hand, they must have money or they must have heavy influences in the police station. These *murubbies* are conducting *shalish* or giving their opinion with the help of different *bongsho* or *shariq*'s leaders if there is any common issue to be settled.

4. CHARACTERISTICS OF COMMUNITIES IN THE STUDY AREA

The word community refers to a group of people who have a lot of common sharing among the people in a particular setting. Those common sharing used to be organised regarding the socio-cultural aspects, which determine the limit of access to available natural resources by every individual in a group or groups around the community. In this regard, the position of *beel* in the community is helping people to continue with their daily life in different ways and every one in that area is directly and indirectly benefiting from *beel*. We can draw an interrelationship between the *beel* and the people living around it. The community around Charan *beel* seems heterogeneous. Here, if we look back to the different villages around *beel* areas,

⁵ Bongsho stands for lineage or pedigree. In this context this is associated with prestige and privilege that sometimes turn into hegemony.

⁶ Shariq means part of something. In this case, shariq stands for descendants or branches of a family.

everyone has been working as the part of a small unit of human groups who are not themselves homogeneous from the beginning. Among them we find land owners and sharecroppers, Land owners and landless, farmers and fishermen, weavers and porters, Hindus And Muslims, and in the end if we consider their position from a holistic perspective, Rich and Poor – all make the community heterogeneous. However, despite their diversities, the whole community possess some common attributes. The villagers of Charan, Jaina bari, Kuturia, Badda, Balla, Shinggair, Tenguria have been cultivating their land inside and outside the *beel* for quite long period of time. So, there are lots of agricultural activities among the community people in and around the *beel* areas in this regard and they are farmers, share croppers or agricultural labourers. On the other hand, the traditional fishermen of Agcharan have their access to *beel* as they leased in the *beel* from the government through their cooperative to use it for fishing.

5. ROLES OF DIFFERENT INSTITUTION IN RELATION TO THE ACCESS TO THE CHARAN BEEL

The different institution in the village has diverse range of influence on the access issue. There are two types of institutions in the village. One is formal and the other is informal institution. The informal institution is called *somaj*. There is a greater village *somaj*, which also divided into small segments according to the ethnic and kinship relations. The Hindus and Muslims have their own *somaj*, but when it refers to village *somaj*, everyone becomes part of it irrespective of their religious subscription. On the other hand, lineage is also another factor in order to understand a *somaj*. Members of certain lineage support their side when rivalry arises. In Charan, two lineages are dominant. One is called Khan *bongsho* while the other is known as Miah. Khan people are the most educated and large land owners in the village. The Miah people were introduced in the village as the tenants of the Khan. So the Khan people have been patronizing the village *somaj* for few decades. The Miah have less power in terms of money and influence. It reflects mainly during the election of local government when people are dictated by the Khan lineage as they cast their votes for their candidates. The Hindu fisher has declined in number. Their *somaj* is very small in terms of power and wealth. So the Khan people pretend as if the fishermen are surviving due to their kindness. In reality, The Khan people historically exploited the fishermen. They have invaded their house during the riot period in 1965. This process is still going on in disguise. The Khan people have invaded common properties and Khas⁷ land in the *beel*. They also play the role of lessee. This power relation shows how Khan people have manipulated the resource management process. They still try to control the access of the traditional fisher into the *beel*.

The above discussion shows clearly the informal institution is not of any help to the fisher when it refers to their access to the water bodies.

⁷ Khas land indicates to the area that belongs to the government as the public property.

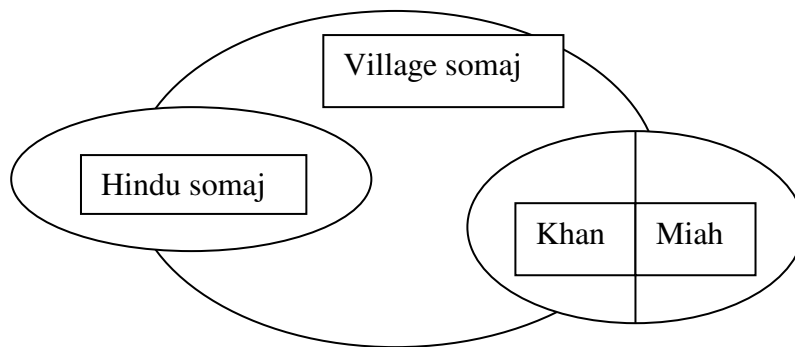


Figure: Formation of *somaj* in Charan beel area

The Hindu fishers of Charan said the fishermen cooperative played a strong role in favour of them historically. It enhanced their access to the water bodies like Charan *beel*. It was assessed by the fishermen as one of the most effective formal institutions for them. The fishermen failed to capitalize anything in local government. Historically, the representatives in the Union Parishad⁸ namely, the chairman and members were from the dominant Khan lineage. They always tried to manipulate the access arrangement of the *beel* to their own people. The Hindu fishermen encountered many bitter incidents as they fought against some of the representatives in the court. The role of the NGO is also clear to people. They always keep relationships with local elites and thugs. The poor people do not get any support from them.

6. THE FORMAL AND INFORMAL INSTITUTIONAL SETTING OF THE BANGLADESH FLOODPLAIN

The definition of the institution can be given simply as the “regular patterns of behaviour” or simply the “ways of getting things done”. In turn, these institutions are comprised of informal institutions, as less tangible entities such as culture, power relations and religious norms.

This overlap and complexity can be particularly pronounced at the local level. Brigitta Bode (2002) has described in detail how Union level institutions can be termed formal or informal but how, in reality, they tend to function together, often reinforcing existing relations rather than challenging them. While formal institutions such as the Union Parishad and village level committees exist to represent notions of democratic governance, representation and accountability, an informal institutional network of social and political power relations also operates. In many cases, this informal tier or “net of power relations” and its origins, pre-dates formal government structures.

Islam (2002) highlights how informal institutions, particularly the *somaj* and the *shalish*, dominate people’s lives and livelihoods in rural Bangladesh. The *somaj* permeates society and represents “an institutional space for collective worship, performance of rituals and festivals”, but its impact and influence are much broader than this. Crucially it represents a mode of social control relying on “psychological

⁸ The micro unit of the village local government.

coercion or manipulation according to socially constructed notions of honour and shame.” According to Bertocci (1996) the *somaj* operates to coordinate activity centred on the mosque, to dictate access to significant social events, to form a bridge for negotiation between external agencies and the local group and to influence voting behaviour. In addition the *somaj* and the *shalish* are intrinsically linked so that the *somaj* may influence decision-making and the outcomes of disputes. In this last regard, the *somaj* can act as both a social basis for new institutions and as a potential constraint to their performance if *somaj* groups create factionalism within new institutions and make them ineffective (Bertocci, 1996).

The *shalish* is essentially a village-level judicial system comprised of local leaders from different social strata (the *mathbor*) and is virtually ubiquitous in Bangladesh. Although the *shalish* is still frequently used for fast and inexpensive dispute resolution, its composition appears to be changing as new strategic actors such as Union Parishad representatives and others with party political interests start to play a greater role (Islam, 2002). However, some NGO initiatives are now targeting the *shalish* as a potential platform for gender-sensitive and egalitarian negotiation.

The institution of the patron-client relationship should be discussed here. Poverty in Bangladesh, and the failings of many development initiatives, have frequently been explained with reference to the “patron-client” relationship (see for instance, Maloney, C., 1986, *Poverty and Behaviour in Bangladesh*). While there are obviously complicated relationships between different sections of society based on power, access to resources, labour and favour, Islam (2002) explains how conventional notions of patronage are becoming outmoded. Rather than the traditionally held image of the landlord-peasant (feudal) relationship, there now appears to be a new form of patronage evolving and one which “is more to do with the penetration of macro-politics into the rural space and people’s need for protection against escalating violence”.

Finally, these informal institutions obviously impinge on NRM issues, either directly or indirectly. With respect to rural development then, we might argue that these pre-existing institutions should at least be acknowledged, and perhaps incorporated into policy or project design and approach. Goldman (1998), for instance, argues that local institutions tend to be by-passed or weakened by development initiatives.

7. LOCAL INITIATIVES FOR FLOODPLAIN MANAGEMENT

Despite the massive expansion of NGO activity and “projection” throughout Bangladesh, local processes and power relations still appear to dictate access to, and control, of local natural resources. Informal institutions may emerge specifically to tackle NRM-related issues or they may affect NRM indirectly. In the context of floodplain management, several such arrangements or “local initiatives” have been described.

The Systems Rehabilitation Project (1990-1997) produced several detailed accounts of local initiatives for water management at Chaptir Haor, for example. In this case, the 5-6 months inundation of the haor annually threatens the boro rice crop with flood

damage. Landowners and farmers meet to discuss the timing and character of community interventions which centre on the cutting, closing and raising of embankments. One of the most interesting aspects of these particular local initiatives is that the resulting actions appear to be genuinely community-wide. During important interventions such as the digging of irrigation channels, for instance, richer farmers may donate their own staff (up to 50 labourers) and food for the task force while the poor also contribute their own time and labour.

Tazim (1997) differentiates between formal and informal decision-making within these initiatives. Most of the decisions appear to be informal and the result of face-to-face interactions between landowners and farmers in the fields. These interventions may require immediate action or may be on a very localised scale. Formal decision-making occurs at meetings convened by the mathbor leaders, usually attended only by leaseholders and farmers.

Where decisions have a wider geographic impact, the mathbor of adjacent villages will be consulted and agreement and permission reached before action is undertaken. If fishing activity is to be disrupted by embankment cutting for drainage at the end of the fishing season, for example, the mathbor of the village in question would discuss any potential action with mathbor representatives from adjacent villages. No formal institutions play a role in decision-making although local staff of the Bangladesh Water Development Board (BWDB) might become involved in the actions.

Although decision-making is preserved for the landowners and farmers (irrigation and drainage needs take precedence over fisher needs) there appears to be collective agreement of the need for collaboration. Although it is likely that poor and rich can benefit from these interventions (the poor via increased agricultural employment and the improvement of marginal land for their own direct use), the reality may be that the poor, having no decision-making power, have little option but to participate. Alternatively, the bio-physical character of the haor may encourage these types of collective initiatives. If fishing operations are extensive at critical periods of the year (possibly because returns from fishing are minimal or rapidly diminishing), decisions in favour of agricultural production are less likely to disadvantage poorer stakeholders. Similarly, locale-specific bio-physical characters may also impact the diversity of livelihood activities, and so the level of social homogeneity and prospects for consensus. Local social history may also have an important part to play here. Alam (2001) discusses how ethnic homogeneity and a historic co-dependence between various stakeholders and the wetlands systems around Charan Beel may account for local cooperation at this site but not in others, for instance.

These informal institutions can be very adaptive, however. In their institutional review of community swamp forest management in Sunamjang, Amin and Islam (in press) have documented how local NRM institutions can evolve and continue to function by accommodating additional pressures from new users. Fenarbak village in Jamalgang Thana has been managing a patch of remnant swamp forest with adherence to local operational rules for generations. The origins of these local institutional arrangements were centred around the mosque (meetings were held at the mosque and revenues

generated were for its maintenance) but the structure of the management committee and its remit has been formalised over the last 60 years. Local influentials continue to dominate this decision-making body but the structure of the committee has become more sophisticated over time and as new satellite villages have grown up in the surrounding area. For instance, a demand for increased transparency meant that the existing committee adopted a formal constitution whereby an apex committee could oversee the use of funds from a separate bank account. The two committees hold quarterly meetings and general meetings, open to all villagers, are held every six months.

According to Amin and Islam, the sustainability of the current arrangement is predicated on the respect afforded to the mosque and the current mathbor. Despite increased transparency and the revenue generating ability of the committee, it is unclear whether new and younger representatives could exert influence in the face of increased pressure on the resource. Historically, the swamp forest has provided fuel and fodder on an extensive basis but there is evidence of encroachment by people from the satellite villages.

The Fenarbak case study provides an interesting contrast to the local initiatives at Chaptir Haor. In the former case, a detailed revenue-generating system has evolved for the purposes of providing financial support to the community or mosque. An interesting issue here would be the extent to which financial incentives have driven the *somaj* and mosque to develop this local initiative. Although revenue generation and NRM are inter-linked in this case, it is possible that the transformation 60 years ago from a three-member mosque committee to two-tier system may be attributed to increasing sophistication in financial and internal management as much as any increase in the range of use rules, sanctions and representation of resource users.

The incentive for cooperation and the institutionalisation of local initiatives at Chaptir Haor seemed to be a collective interest in damage limitation. Detailed operational rules were not applied here. This may be because the nature and location of each intervention is unpredictable, varying from year to year, and that ad hoc actions were sufficiently effective. In this case, formalising revenue-generation was unnecessary. In contrast, the situation at Fenarbak, seems to enable the collection of revenue (perhaps rather than necessitate it). For instance, it may be that as a visually demarcated commons, use and misuse of the 25 hectare swamp forest is easily monitored in a way that would be impossible in the floodplain context with moving boundaries.

Alam (2001) has outlined the local initiatives that have evolved to perform simple water management functions at Charan in Tangail district. The village is in close proximity to three *beels* (Charan Beel, Laksmi Proshad Beel and Alam Kha Beel). At the beginning of the twentieth century the local population was almost entirely Hindu, with the jele fisher caste representing the largest occupational group in the area. At this time, several Brahmin families were in control of the village but after partition in 1947 the Hindu dominance decreased through migration and the entry of Muslim people to the area. The dominant ethnic group is now Muslim.

Fulltime fishers have access to the *beel* all year round and some farmers also enter the fishery with simple gears for supplemental income when required. The *beel* is typical of many such water bodies in providing numerous livelihoods options for people in neighbouring villages and, in particular, in providing options for the poor in times of hardship (reflected in the local Hindu name for the *beel*, *khoraki*, meaning subsistence from any miscellaneous or irregular source). Higher parts of the *beel* may be privately owned but access is open during the flood and fishers from the neighbouring thana can also enter the fishery unimpeded.

There are no village-level formal institutions for the management of the *beel* and its resources but small local initiatives are conducted for the purpose of water management. Unlike the Chaptir Haor examples in which local interventions were largely intended to protect crops and agricultural land, the interventions at Laksmi Proshad *beel* also function to sustain fishing opportunities.

The initiatives at Laksmi Proshad centre around an allegiance between 40-50 very poor households and the landowners of some of the marginal areas of the *beel* (areas semi-submerged during flood). Although these poor are predominantly rickshaw pullers, labourers and sharecroppers, they diversify their activities during the monsoon and target the *beel* fishery for subsistence. In turn, the land owners in question must face a critical trade-off between the negative impacts of water-logging on paddy and the need to conserve water for irrigation in later months. The outcome is that the landowners enlist the labour of this poor group to cut drainage channels and help drain water from their land. Water may be drained from all but the deepest parts of this land so that only *katha* pits are submerged and these provide a source of water for *boro* irrigation in later months and a fishing opportunity after the flood has receded. Access to this fishery is shared between landowners and this poor group.

Although there are mutual interests in water management between the landowners and the poor, it is the poor that depend greatest on the arrangement. The fish catch provides direct subsistence to poor families and surplus catch provides a cheap source of fish for the wider community. During the receding flood, the people of Charan village undertake further collective actions to maximise the potential of the fishery. During the month of *Kartic*, labourers attempt to retain the water and block the receding flood by repairing embankments and constructing small dams across the canals. Fishing then continues until the month of *Poush* and the fish caught are sold in *Balla Bazar* or consumed by villagers directly.

Another feature that makes this such an interesting local initiative is the fact that some of these constructed dams require their own form of management, particularly with respect to guarding. The dams may cost about one thousand *taka* to construct and investment is shared by the group involved. Tents are erected close to the dams so that they can be guarded from poaching by outsiders and so that damage can be repaired quickly. Representatives of Charan village share this responsibility on a *rota* basis and each group may expect to raise about thirty to fifty thousand *taka* from fish sales by the close of the season.

In summary, it is difficult to distinguish which local characteristics have allowed these forms of collective action to evolve but, paradoxically, self-interest and social capital may both have a role here. In the case of Chaptir Haor, the mutual gains resulting from the initiatives are more or less visible and immediate to the landowners and to the poor. With respect to social capital, it may be that peer pressure and social checks between families and neighbours both prevent cheating and provide the prerequisite trust required for group investment in dam-building etc.

However, it is unclear whether there is anything specific to the social context at Charan village that has allowed these arrangements to evolve and to continue. If these arrangements are predicated on social cohesion, as Alam suggests they might be, then the issue arises as to whether these arrangements are in any way under threat by social changes such as new forms of patron-client relations (the greater use of threats and violence by the leasees, for example) or ethnic and demographic changes at the beel. In this latter case, Alam (2001) has documented how fishers from the neighbouring village of Badda-Have, are increasingly ignoring local access arrangements and challenging the informal institutions (rules) of Charan village.

8. CONCLUSION

Popular wisdom that derives from traditional culture is not a constraint to adopt development strategies. Local people's way of thinking often enable them share their natural resources is an old practice. Rather than neglecting this fact better understanding of such local practices would help avoid competition among different kinship groups in the community. The community would acknowledge the benefit of development interventions in natural resource management without having minimum conflicts among them.

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