

Evolution and Growth of Civil Society in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This paper examines the evolution and growth of civil society in Bangladesh. It carries out major academic discussions, engagements, theories, debates and discourses on civil society life in the state. The incapability of the state institutions in providing basic services to the poor and failure of the varying governments to fulfill the aspirations of the Bangladeshi youth laid the strong foundation of the third sector. Movements for voting for women, abolition of slavery, human rights, civil rights etc., were originally initiated and carried out by civil society organizations. Bangladesh has inherited such good values of civil societies through its colonial past and membership of United Nations. It ends with an opinion that the achievements of NGOs in the political field is abysmally low, but they have been in the leading edge of present day social developments.

Keywords: Civil Society, Army, Parallel Government, Democracy

Introduction

Generally, civil society includes the wide range of associations, social values, practices and activities different from the activities of the institutions of the state such as political parties, government agencies, or norms about voting or the institutions of the market such as corporations, stock markets or expectations about the honoring of contracts. But ultimately what makes its basis more powerful are intellectual, material and organizational basis of the actors of civil society. One could find elaborative academic and theoretical explanations on the third sector of the society in a period where state and market dominates the whole areas of human life. But at the same time, one could see the relevant role plays or played by the third sector to make an unresponsive state to a responsive one to counter the imbalanced activities of the state and the market. A keen observation will enable to reflect the fact that the third sector in Bangladesh embraces the

activities of religion, much of primary, secondary and tertiary education, some health care facilities, much arts and culture, a great deal of social services through philanthropic organizations, developmental NGOs and organizations for mutual benefit like cooperatives and trade unions.¹

Whatever be the realistic principles on state which gained momentum in a turbulent world order, its fact that the third sector has been on the leading edge of social movements which are now accepted as the norm. In the context of Bangladesh, the pluralistic theory of state would be the appropriate one to justify the relevance of third sector. The present vibrant civil society was the result of weak state system. The incapability of the state institutions in providing basic services to the poor and failure of the varying governments to fulfill the aspirations of the Bangladeshi youth laid the strong foundation of the third sector.² Movements for voting for women, abolition of slavery, human rights, civil rights etc., were originally initiated and carried out by civil society organizations. Bangladesh has inherited such good values of civil societies through its colonial past and membership of United Nations. Of course, the achievements of NGOs in the political field is abysmally low, but they have been in the leading edge of present day social developments.³

In civil society organizations, the fundamental distinction is between those organizations operating for the benefit of their members and those operating for the benefit of others. The governance structure, the acceptability, the access to resources, the links to outsider etc., all depend on whether the organization is a creation of its members for itself or a creation of individuals for others. The organizations intend to improve the social and economic situations of the poor assume the role of a parallel government where state fails

1 Haider, Sheik Kabir Uddin. (2011), "Genesis and Growth of the NGOs: Issues in Bangladesh Perspective", *International NGO Journal*, Vol. 6(11), pp. 240-247.

2 Lewis, David. (2011), *Bangladesh : Politics, Economy and Civil Society*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 109-110.

3 Husain, Anwar Syed. (1994), "Challenges of Democratic Governance in Bangladesh", In S. R. Chakravorthy (eds.), *Society, Polity and Economy of Bangladesh*, Har Anand Publications: New Delhi, pp. 112.

in its obligations to the people.⁴ Many writers on civil society and the third sector seem to equate NGOs with civil society or indeed that there are no organizations of civil society beyond NGOs.

The NGO sector extends from the primary level of popular or grass root organizations to intermediary or support organizations to the national level network and consortia. One may tentatively suggest that an NGO is involved in four connected fields: (1) maintains itself as an organizations, securing funding and other inputs, ensuring cooperation between leadership, staff and volunteers, planning for the future etc., (2) implementing projects, working with the beneficiaries, finding the best working methods, cooperating with other organizations etc., (3) building up a fond of knowledge, developing expertise in certain fields, doing research, cooperating with research institutes etc., (4) the social context, working to improve or sustain the enabling environment by influencing the state and the business sector.⁵

The NGOs are considered as trend setters and hence they are known as Alternative Development Strategies.⁶ It is also observed that NGOs have generally been able to reach the poor where the government failed. They are a legally constituted non-profit making body, which are created by private persons or organizations with no participation or representation of government. They are active in the field in the fields of development issues such as rural development, alleviation of poverty, health and education and global issues such as the environment, human rights, refugees and the population crisis. It is identified that the NGOs posses six attributes in its functioning: (1) non-governmental, (2) non-profit making, (3) voluntary, (4) of a solid and continuing form, (5) altruistic and (6) philanthropic.⁷

4 *Ibid.*,

5 Pearce, Jenny (1998), "Building Civil Society from the Outside: The Problematic Democratization of Central America", *Global Society*, Vol. 12, No. 2, March 22, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

6 Brown, L and D. C. Korten. (1991), "Working More Effectively with Non-Governmental Organisations", In Paul (eds.) *Non-Governmental Organisations and the World Bank: Cooperations for Development*, Washington: The World Bank Press.

7 Amnuzzaman, S. (1998), "NGOs and Grassroots Base Local Government in Bangladesh: A Study of their Institutional Interactions", In F. Hossain and S. Mylly (eds.), *NGOs Under Challenge Dynamics and Drawbacks in Development*, Department of the International Development Cooperation, Helsinki-84-

NGO Sector in Bangladesh

The tradition of voluntary work in Bangladesh has had deeply rooted in its own social, religious and economic conditions.⁸ The term “NGOization” got its full prominence since the public sector failed to expand its services to the poor.⁹ NGOs sprang in Bangladesh as an important alternative to the public delivery and other services system after its emergence. Since the British era, NGOs have been working as different religious based schools, hospitals and orphanages but a radical transformation happened only after its Independence. In due course of time, they have infiltrated into the exclusive domain of government by engaging in poverty eradication programmes. Gradually, NGOs started to help in the field of group formation, credit, formal and non-formal education, health and nutrition, family planning and gender development, poultry and livestock, agriculture, sanitation, environment, human rights, advocacy, legal aids etc., Their untiring efforts gained them an indisputable role in the social life of Bangladesh.¹⁰ Government’s failure in sorting the issues of unemployment, poverty, social justice and environmental degradation and of course global changes has gained a reputation for NGOs as an effective development agencies and development partner. Here the popularity of the NGOs should be identified with government as NGOs grows in an atmosphere where legal restrictions are less and more feasible, particularly after 1991.

The mushroom growth of NGOs in Bangladesh took everyone in surprise. So a categorization of NGOs since Independence would be more feasible step to understand the aim of this chapter, i.e, the history and development of civil society and NGOs in Bangladesh. To be precise, one could categorise the growth of NGOs into four. In the first stages of their growth (1971-80), much importance were on relief and welfare services. The second generation strategies (1980-91) were characterized by small scale, self-reliant, local development initiatives for building people’s capacity. In the third

8 Batkin, A. (1992). “NGOs: The Case of RDRS in Bangladesh”, In Murray Robin (eds.) New Forms of Public Administration, IDS bulletin, Vol. 23: 4.

9 Mc Michael. P. (1996), “Development and Social Change: A Global Perspective”, California: Pine Forge Press.

10 Mohiuddin (2002), “An Introduction to the Non- profit Sector in Bangladesh”, BFF; Allvida.

generation movement of NGOs (1991-2000), the focus was shifted to help the people to participate in policy changes in different levels. In the fourth stages of NGOs growth (2001-12), a new undeclared approach was adopted by most of these development NGOs. Critics call it as “Micro-Credit Evangelism”.¹¹

Since the 1970s, the major focus of NGO sector has been on social welfare activities, with interventions in the fields of social mobilization and rural development and later it was increasingly being incorporated into mainstream national development endeavors. Bangladesh has experienced the enormous growth of NGOs as it happened in the world scenario. But the pace of NGOization in Bangladesh was high than any other countries which labeled it as a land of NGOs. It is estimated that there are 19000 NGOs working in Bangladesh (Huq, 1997).¹² in October, 2008, NGOs registered with the NGO Bureau (NGOAB) is 2340 (NGOAB Registration Unit). Under the Ordinance of 1961 social welfare agency, the NGOs was 2101 in 2001 to 2002, 1962 in 2002 to 2003, 2433 in 2003 to 2004 and 1575 in 2004 to 2005 fiscal year (Social Welfare Department 2005). In 2004, the number of voluntary organization was given by Social Service Department (SSD) in 45026.¹³ It shows the really increasing and active side of NGOs in the country. Based on their origin, role and geographical zoning, NGOs are grouped into three major categories (1) local, (2) national, (3) international. The main areas of work of local and national are in organizing, mobilizing and empowering the poor at the domestic level.¹⁴

Evolution of NGOs in Bangladesh

Though NGOs engaged in diversified types of activities, the evolution of NGOs could be summarized on the basis of distinctive orientations in programming strategies. In the colonial period, voluntarism was almost synonymous with charity work. During the occasions of flood, famine and other calamities, the zamindar and other elite land lords had emerged to help the victims. The altruistic attitude of the elite of then society to look

11 Haider, Sheik Kabir Uddin. (2011), “Genesis and Growth of the NGOs: Issues in Bangladesh Perspective”, International NGO Journal, Vol. 6(11), pp. 240-247.

12 *Ibid.*, pp. 241.

13 Lewis, David. (2011), *Bangladesh : Politics, Economy and Civil Society*, New York: Cambridge University Press, pp. 112.

14 *Op. Cit.*, pp. 241.

after their tenants was the main inspiration behind it. But the institutionalization of such charity works happened with the expansion of Christian missionaries. They had started orphanages, schools and hospitals in the remote and poverty stricken areas of Bangladesh.¹⁵ Baptist Missionary Society (1794), Christin Mission Hospital (1880), Kumudini welfare Trust etc., are the oldest NGOs working in the country.¹⁶ The Registration Act of 1861 promulgated for the promotion of literature, science or for the diffusion of useful knowledge and political education during the British period.

The community development approach entered Bangladesh as early as 1956 in the Pakistan Academy for Rural development as the Commila Approach to integrated rural development with its co-operatives and a two tier organizational structure. But the failure of government to carry out such programme led to the introduction of more NGOs in this field. The ten tidal waves in the coastal area of Noakhali between 1960 and 1970 badly effected the economically backward East Pakistan. During these periods, Co-operative for American Relief in Everywhere (CARE) and CARITAS had become heavily involved in sheltering vulnerable displaced peoples.¹⁷

Organizations involved in the following activities were identified as voluntary social welfare agencies: 1) Child Welfare, 2) Youth Welfare, 3) Women's Welfare, 4) Welfare of the physically and mentally disabled, 5) Family planning, 6) Recreational programmes intended to encourage people away from anti-social activities, 7) Social education, 8) Welfare and rehabilitation of released destitute, 9) Welfare of the handicapped, 10) Patient welfare and rehabilitation, 11) Welfare of the aged and infirm, 12) Social work training, 13) Coordination of social welfare agencies.¹⁸ Though the Ordinance gives the government power to intervene in the NGOs sectors, the relevance of the Ordinance is questionable on three grounds. Firstly, the political circumstances behind its introduction

15 Rahman, ATR. (1993), "Volunteerism and Nation-Building for Bangladesh", Dhaka: Academic Publishers.

16 Sanyal, R. (1980), "Voluntary Association and the Urban Public life of Bengal", Calcutta: RIDDDHI.

17 Lewis, David. (2010), "Disciplined Activists, Unruly Brokers? Exploring the Boundaries between Non-governmental Organizations (NGOs), Donors, and the State in Bangladesh" In David N. Gellner (eds.) *Varieties of Activist Experience: Civil Society n South Asia*, New Delhi: Sage Publications.

18 *Ibid.*, pp. 242.

no longer appertain as Bangladesh has its own constitution. Secondly, the scope of the NGO activities has expanded far beyond the fifteen areas specified in 1961. Thirdly, the pertinence of the Ordinance is not clear since it does not provide any legal identity to the NGOs.¹⁹

It was particularly after the 1971 cyclone, both national and international NGOs started their operations in Bangladesh as relief organizations. The war of liberation of 1971 followed immediately after the cyclone forced a section of those who participated in relief activities joined the war. Following independence many of these individuals or groups formed NGOs and a large number of international voluntary organization as the reconstruction of the war devastated economy attracted major inflow of resources from overseas. In the initial days, they were primarily involved in providing food and essential commodities to the war afflicted people and they were involved also in the distribution of clothing, medical and food items, and even extended their work to construction of house for war victims. They also took part in developing physical infrastructure such as roads and bridges. Later, they got the status of leading NGOs in Bangladesh.²⁰ They are BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, GK, CARITAS (Christian Organization for Relief and Rehabilitation), CCDB (The Christian Commission for Development in Bangladesh), Proshika etc., By 1973, through performing relief work, NGOs could mobilize large groups of workers who had experienced interaction with national and international agencies. But in the same period leaders of NGOs realized that relief efforts do not solve the problem of the poor and they felt that if relief works and the resources could be channeled in a productive way by involving the recipients themselves then the NGOs role would more positive.

One of the main areas of NGOs focus was in poverty alleviation under the purview of rural development. The V-Aid (Village Agriculture and Industrial Development) program, launched in 1953, organized large number of Chand Tara Clubs and Touth club

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Lovell, C. (1992), "Breaking the Cycle of Poverty: The BRAC Strategy", Hartford: Kumarian Press.

to encourage the villagers to work on cooperative basis.²¹ But it abandoned in 1960 as it failed create any impact in the situations of rural society in Bangladesh. It was followed by the Comilla Model developed through a series of pilot research by the Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development (BRAD) during the 1960s.²² It was based on a collective group approach and credit. According to the working of this programme, farmers were organized into two tier Cooperative groups Credit and other development inputs were mobilized through these Cooperative groups. But many of the macro-reforms have failed to achieve desire success from time to time due to the non-existence of appropriate institutions to execute such reform at the grassroots level. But the NGOs succeeded in this palce as they have small size and their concentration on a limited number of activities they were capable to deal creatively with situational demands. Thus, “where the GOB failed to achieve the desired success, the NGOs played an important role in complementing the government efforts”.²³ Hence, it is argued that the “emergence of NGOs in Bangladesh is directly related to the failure of the governments to meet the hopes and aspirations of the people”.²⁴

Non-Governmental Organizations and Bottom-up Social Transformation Movement

Since 1973, NGOs emphasized on integrated community development programs. They dealt with sectoral activities such as agriculture, fisheries, livestock, cooperatives etc. The NGOs realized that development process can be kept ongoing through technical assistance. They identified target groups consisting of disadvantaged poor people. They arranged to train-up people to enhance their social consciousness and to form their own institutions. The people were helped to undertake collaborative social actions such as bargaining for higher wages, better terms in share-cropping, land lease, protection against abuse of rape, dowry, and divorce without compensations. Thus, the NGOs initiated a

21 Hussain M. Z. (1996) “Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-Aid) Program”, pp. 91-120, In Quddus M. A (eds.), *Rural Development in Bangladesh: Strategies and Experiences*, BARD (Bangladesh Academy for Rural Development), Commila.

22 Hye, H. A. (1996), “Below the Line: Rural Poverty in Bangladesh”, Dhaka, University Press Limited.

23 Huda, K. S. (1990), “Genesis and Growth of NGOs in Bangladesh”, ADAB NEWS, May-June.

24 Hasan, S. Mulamootil, G and Kersell, J. E. (1992), “Voluntary organisations in Bangladesh: A Profile”, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 4(2), pp. 196–206.

proven process of development at the grassroots.²⁵ Meanwhile, many new NGOs came into existence and expanded their programs basing on the needs of the target people. During the initial years of work as development NGOs, they mainly replicated the mainstream development programs following a community based approach. However, they very quickly understood the shortcomings of the community based approach the target group approach. It was during this period, that one witnessed form a radicalism in the perception of a section of NGOs about their role.²⁶

They started highlighting the fact that the root causes of poverty were structural and they themselves were catalyst organizations working towards transforming the power structure. Therefore, organization building of the rural poor, reducing dependence on traditional power elites, development of the independent resource base of the rural elite, participation in social actions for confronting the power structure all became part of their wider development objectives. BRAC (Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee, Nijera Kori, ASA (Association for Social Advancement), Proshika Manobik Unnoyon Kendra (PMUK), Proshika Comilla are some organization who were in the forefront of such bottom -up social transformation movement.²⁷ By mid- 1980s, therefore, one witnesses another shift in NGO objectives from social transformation through bringing in changes in power structures towards providing specific services to their target groups and also to the wider community services which were hitherto not available from the state, private sector, and other civil society organizations. At present, services available from NGOs include health care, family planning, legal aid, non-formal primary education and micro-finance. The most important service that has earned Bangladesh NGOs international recognition is the delivery of micro-credit.²⁸

25 Haider, Sheik Kabir Uddin. (2011), "Genesis and Growth of the NGOs: Issues in Bangladesh Perspective", International NGO Journal, Vol. 6(11), pp. 244.

26 *Ibid.*, pp-245.

27 *Ibid.*,

28 *Ibid.*,

Non-Governmental Organizations and Micro Credit Financing

Micro-credit program or revolving loan fund were common among NGOs from the beginning of their involvement in Bangladesh. This approach was first introduced by the Grameen Bank of Bangladesh and it is considered as the pioneer in this model. Grameen Bank's innovative collateral free credit model was developed in 1975, the benefit of these credit services hardly reached the poor.²⁹ The massive acceptance of Grameen Bank among the rural poor and its rapid expansion in Bangladesh as well as replication worldwide represent its excellent success. By now, it is the largest micro-credit program in the world and is considered as the model in the field of poverty alleviation. Apart from Grameen Bank alone, others like BRAC, Proshika, ASA, RDRS (Rangpur Dinajpur Rural Service), TMSS (Thengamara Mohila Sabuj Sanngaha) and few NGOs were involved in collateral-free credit program on substantial scale. An increasing thrust towards a credit program by mainstream NGOs have been observed since the mid-nineties. It now the biggest activity of the big NGOs and is a core activity of many medium and small NGOs.³⁰ Though the micro credit approach has subjected to several criticisms in the name of micro credit evangelism, it gained a lot for the downtrodden sections of Bangladesh society. The change it brought in the social and economic aspects and relations of that society is highly visible.

NGOs activities have virtually grown into a movement in Bangladesh and eventually playing a very significant role in the nation's development process. They assumed a vital role in certain sectors such as poverty reduction, family planning, gender issues, primary health care, education, rural development, improvement of infrastructure and environment protection. In public sector these areas have received scanty attention and small resources allocation at the implementation level.³¹ However, different type data are found about the number of NGOs working in Bangladesh from the publications of different agencies. NGOs usually are registered with different government agencies such as the NGO Affairs Bureau (NGOAB), Ministry of Social Welfare, Ministry of Youth

29 Lewis, D. (2001), "The Management of Non-Governmental Development Organisations", London: Routledge.

30 *Op. Cit.*, pp. 244.

31 Shelly, M. R. (1992), "NGO Movement in Bangladesh", Working Paper.

and Sports, Ministry of Women Affairs, Ministry of Forest and Environment. Its a usual scene in every Bangladesh village, one find signboards depicting the identity of some clubs or samities. The number of NGOs in Bangladesh indicates that Bangladesh is a hunting ground and a land of opportunities and opportunists too. This increasing number of NGOs is perhaps the symbol of the traditional Bangladeshi heritage of every one for each other.³²

In short, the stages of development of NGOs in Bangladesh remarked by three important factors. Firstly, in the beginning Bangladesh was in a organic stage of state's growth where state had to find, accumulate and distribute all its resources to the people. But the national liberation war and natural calamities made it too incapable to deliver its welfare services to the people. So the incapability of the state in alleviating poverty and the reconstruction of war affected society led to the opening up of NGO activities in Bangladesh. Secondly, the political process also had an impact on the development of NGOs in Bangladesh. It was till the 1970s, the associational life in the country had been subjected to strict vigilance and control. But after the restoration of democracy in the year 1991, the political atmosphere entirely got changed and it relaxed the control over NGO activities. Finally, a paradigm shift happened also in the case of NGO itself. In the first two stages of their development, mentioned above, their focus was on social development. But later it got altered by social business approach of the international NGOs.

Political Processes and the Civil Society in Bangladesh

In order to make a clear understanding about the development and varying nature of civil society in Bangladesh, it is necessary to understand the nature of the state and the political process in the country. Traditional role of the state does not only govern but also grant rights to its citizens, undertake developmental activities and promote ideology which may take the form of nationalism, form of government. The nature of the state tends to change with the change in the dispensation of governance and in the ideological orientation depending on which forces happen to exercise state power. The post liberation

³² *Op. Cit.*, Haider, pp. 246.

government of Bangladesh believed in Bengali nationalism, democracy, secularism and socialism. Bengali nationalism alienated some non-Bengali ethnic minorities creating as a consequence of national building.³³ The secular principles of the constitution banned all religious political parties, having antagonized a vast array of powerful political and social forces. It is an astonishing contrast that a citizen of Bangladesh has a twin identity-he is a Muslim as well as a Bengali. The state's secular vision has been facing a lot of chaos in the context of multi ethnic society.³⁴

The post liberation Sheikh Mujibur Rahman government had not succeeded in striking a balance between the imperatives of governing a post independent turbulent polity and at the same time keeping a non-coercive democratic order in place. The Special Powers Act 1974 had curtailed certain fundamental rights of the citizens. The fourth Amendment to the constitution brought about on 25 January 1975 to make the state a party system called BAKSAL was considered as a blow to the multi party political system.³⁵ The clash between secular and communal sentiments in the streets basically reduced the scope and space for civil society and other associations in the country. This phase was characterized by a minimal space and development for civil society organizations in the country, though one could see some NGOs started working in several parts of Bangladesh.

The next phase from August 1975 to December 1990 was noted by the complexion of the ruling elite, the ideology and governance philosophy, the ethos and values they sought to perpetuate and promote, the attitudes they showed towards constitutional politics, the role they sought for themselves in the polity and the methods and techniques they adopted in the state craft. The assassination of then President Mujibur Rahman on 15 August 1975 paved the way for a long spell of military and quasi-military rule, first by President Ziaur Rahman (1975-1981) and then by General H. M. Ershad (1982-1990). During these periods, changes were brought in to the fundamental principles of the state policy. The

33 Husain, Anwar Syed. (1994), "Challenges of democratic Governance in Bangladesh" In S. R. Chakravorthy (eds.), *Society, Polity and Economy of Bangladesh*, Har Anand Publications: New Delhi, pp. 112.

34 *Ibid.*,

35 Charlton, R. and May, R. (1995), "NGOs, Politics, Projects and Probity: A Policy Implementation Perspective", *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 8 No.2, pp. 1-24.

concept secularism was substituted by the faith and trust in Allah and Bengali nationalism was replaced by Bangladeshi nationalism.³⁶ The ban on Islamic and other right wing political parties was lifted. It embraces all the citizens of the country irrespective of their ethnic origins. But this period had two important implications-one was the strengthening role of communal forces in politics and military led to a situation where minorities struggled in all respects and the second was the squeezing and muzzling of associational freedom in the country.³⁷

Democracy was restored in 1991 with the Bangladeshi Nationalist Party (BNP) winning the majority of seats in Parliament. Begum Khaled Zia became Prime Minister and Sheikh Hasina of the Awami League became leader of the opposition. It was during this period the Twelfth Amendment to the Constitution was adopted, changing the form of government from Presidential to Parliament. The political opposition led by the Awami League boycotted the Parliament and the political scenario in the country in 1995 and early 1996 became pretty chaotic due to political movement to unseat the BNP government. But Begum Khaleda Zia eventually yielded to the demand for caretaker government and a new political institution had been created in Bangladesh. The Neutral Caretaker government was headed by retired Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh through the Thirteenth Amendment to the Constitution.

The Awami League came to power on 23 June 1996 but the political opposition led by BNP alleged partiality of the Speaker in running the National Parliament and boycotted it for good part of its 5 year term. So the Parliament could not function properly and it resulted in a set back on the democratization process.³⁸ The law and order situation in the country deteriorated considerably. But the government completed its mandated 5 year term and left office on 15 July 2001. As per the 13th Amendment to the Constitution, a caretaker government assumed office on the same date for three months and it was

36 Kabir, Humayun Mohammed and Mizanur Rahman Khan, (2002), "Civil Society and Democracy in Bangladesh", Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies, Dhaka: Bangladesh.

37 *Ibid.*,

38 Clarke, G. (1998), "Non-Governmental Organizations and Politics in the Developing World", *Political Studies*, Vol. XLVI, pp. 36-52.

mandated to preside over the transition to the next elected government by holding a free and fair election within 90 days. General elections were held on 1 October 2001, in which the BNP-led four party alliances won a landslide victory garnering more than two thirds majority in parliament.³⁹ Throughout these periods, the number and areas of NGOs and their activities considerably increased irrespective of political clashes and backlashes between two political wings, Awami League and BNP. The presence of communal political parties with BNP added fuel to the then existing political crisis. However, the life of NGOs in Bangladesh has been institutionalized and the prominence of state's role in welfare activities has diminished. The nature and functions of NGOs has also been changing these days as some of them be sided with major political parties, some of them started lending money to the poor with high interest etc.,

The 2002–04 Rift: A New Page in the Life of NGOs in Bangladesh

It was in the year 2001, some of the giant NGOs in Bangladesh had faced a set back from the political process of Bangladesh. After the election of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-led coalition government in October, an important section of the NGO community entered a period of crisis. The presence of Jamate Islami with the then ruling BNP intensified the crisis. Five well-established NGOs were accused by the new government of both financial irregularities and politically partisan behavior. It was alleged that certain NGOs had lent assistance to the electoral campaign of the ruling Awami League party. The best known of these NGOs was Proshika, a national-level organization engaged in a wide range of development activities across Bangladesh and it was the second-largest NGO in the country, including a range of service delivery and campaigning work.⁴⁰ its a fact that the leftist student activists in the 1970s had been inspired by the liberation of the country from Pakistan, but felt constrained in the pursuit of their style of progressive politics under the increasingly authoritarian style of government of Sheikh Mujib Rahman. When Proshika was established in 1976, it provided a way of linking of activist

³⁹ *Op. Cit.*, p. 17.

⁴⁰ Ashman, D. (1997), "The Democracy Awareness Education Program of the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB): A Discourse", *A Journal of Policy Studies*, Dhaka: Institute for Development Policy Analysis and Advocacy (IDPAA), Proshika.

and developmental objectives. The progressive ideas of Proshika always irritated the fundamentalist groups in Bangladesh. In the words of Smillie and Hailey, “Proshika grew out of a donor project which was also staffed, and later taken over, by young social activists.” Led by its founder Q.F. Ahmed, Proshika had always tried to set itself apart from the mainstream development NGO community by seeking to maintain and project a strong ‘activist’ public profile.⁴¹

While it has been usual for many of Bangladesh’s NGOs to claim and display their radical roots, Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* was a formative text for several founder leaders and supporters in the 1970s, much of the sector by the 1990s had followed organizations such as Grameen Bank and the Association for Social Advancement (ASA) into work which had micro-finance service provision at its center in place of ‘social mobilization’ strategies. Proshika, on the other hand, while it also operated an extensive national-level programme of credit provision in both rural and urban areas, had also gradually expanded its campaigning and activism, establishing a dedicated research and advocacy center, and is seeking to build what it termed a ‘civil society movement’ that could help link together other like-minded NGOs, women’s organizations, trade unions, and newspapers in support of issues such as women’s rights, environmental issues, and democratic governance.⁴²

But by the end of the 1990s, due to a combination of both internal and external factors, the space available for this type of work appeared to have narrowed. One important set of internal factors was undoubtedly organizational. Favored by international donors to a high degree, many NGOs had expanded very rapidly and this growth had placed a considerable strain on their administrative systems and overall coherence. At the external level, several types of macro factors have operated, including the changing priorities of

41 Smillie, I. and J. Hailey. (2001), “Managing for Change: Leadership, Strategy and Management”, London: Earthscan.

42 This is explained by several movements and initiatives, including the establishment of the Institute for Development Policy Analysis and Advocacy (IDPAA) in 1994 as a semi-autonomous research, advocacy, and training institution. Its activities included coordinating the Pro-Poor National Budget campaign to promote participatory budgeting approaches and the Structural Adjustment Participatory Research Initiative (SAPRI) which brought a range of non-state actors together to debate and challenge the World Bank’s structural adjustment programme.

international donors, the increased flow of private finance alongside development initiatives, and a set of Islamizing processes within national politics. NGOs in Bangladesh had been subject to changing priorities within the international donor community, where an earlier and somewhat uncritical pro-NGO position was hardening into one in which more emphasis was being placed on performance and accountability issues, in which the measurable targets of the millennium development goals were gaining in priority. The government too, always somewhat wary of the NGOs but having reached an effective accommodation with them around service delivery partnerships and common interests in expanding microfinance provision, was also changing its position.⁴³

The key for activist development NGOs going about their work in South Asia has generally involved “*keeping politically neutral and negotiating with whoever is in power*”, as Appadurai has put it, in connection with his work with the Society for the Promotion of Area Resource Centres (SPARC) in India.⁴⁴ But by 2002 the difficulty of maintaining such an approach, and the political hazards of grassroots organizing work, began to become more starkly apparent for Proshika and the other NGOs. What were the reasons for the subsequent rupture that took place, and what are its implications for understandings of the ways in which governance relationships are negotiated and secured within the current complex policy framework of international development assistance and within the Bangladesh state’s own fragile systems, strategies, and structures?⁴⁵

Since the fall of General Ershad in 1990, the new system of parliamentary democracy has produced regular general elections and a BNP-led government from 1991 to 1996, an Awami League government in 1996–2001, and the subsequent BNP-led alliance government that continued until 2006. Despite this democratic process, as Kochanek puts it, “*formal democratic institutions have proven to be weak and there persists an informal*

43 Hashemi, S.M. (1995), “NGO Accountability in Bangladesh: NGOs, State and Donors” In M. Edwards and D. Hulme (eds), *NGO Performance and Accountability: Beyond the Magic Bullet*, pp. 103–10. London: Earthscan.

44 Appadurai, A. (2001), “Deep Democracy: Urban Governmentality and the Horizon of Politics”, *Environment and Urbanization*, Vol. 13(2), pp. 23–43.

45 Mosse, D. (2005), “Cultivating Development: An Ethnography of Aid Policy and Practice”, London: Pluto Press.

*political process that has failed to instil or support equality of access to core political institutions, an adequate popular voice, effective governmental performance and full protection of citizen's rights".*⁴⁶

Frequent hartals, increasing political violence, and frequent boycotts of parliament have each come to characterize political life, alienating many citizens from any trust in formal political processes. Some sections of the NGO community have responded to increasingly confrontational and gridlocked parliamentary politics with a more activist style and approach. A wide range of mass demonstrations and civil society alliances were effectively coordinated by Proshika and the Association of Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB) during the second half of the 1990s. Karim (2001) exaggerates that at this time a section of the NGO community—led by Proshika—had actually ‘*taken over*’ oppositional political processes in the name of ‘*non-party politics*’, but the higher political profile of such NGOs had clearly begun to rattle some nerves.⁴⁷

Like many of the development NGOs, Proshika was broadly identified with the secular nationalist vision of a democratic Bangladesh, and one that was loosely associated with the Awami League party. But its leadership had also long been vocal in its criticisms of what it saw as extremist and unpatriotic religious elements in the public sphere, such as the Jamaat-i-Islami party, elements of which are believed to have collaborated with the Pakistani army in the killing of thousands of citizens during the liberation war in 1971. As Riaz has argued, there has indeed been a “*conservative Islamization process*” underway in Bangladesh for the past few decades.⁴⁸ But it would be a mistake to interpret this as driven by the “*reassertion of a dormant Muslim identity*”. Rather, it is encouraged primarily by the “*crises of hegemony*” of the ruling elites and by a “*politics of expediency*” on the part of the secularist political parties. As a result, there have been cases of violence in some parts of the country by religious activists against Proshika and

46 Kochanek, S. (2003), “Policy Process in Bangladesh”, Dhaka, Bangladesh: UK Department for International Development.

47 Karim, L. (2001), “Politics of the Poor? NGOs and Grassroots Political Mobilisation in Bangladesh”, *Political and Legal Anthropology Review (PoLAR)*, Vol. 24(1), pp. 92–107.

48 Riaz, A. (2003), “God Willing: The Politics and Ideology of Islamism in Bangladesh”, *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, Vol. 23(1–2), pp. 301–320.

other NGO offices and fieldworkers and Proshika's president himself became the target of several fatwa by local religious leaders. The increasing profile and voice of Islamist political interests, which had for some time been hostile to the development NGO community in relation to their foreign funding and discourses of women's empowerment, was another factor that disturbed the uneasy equilibrium between NGOs and government.

After the 2001 election, the Jamate Islami political party for the first time gained significant electoral ground within the ruling coalition formed by the BNP. Both parties saw an opportunity to settle old scores with Proshika and other NGOs which they regarded as unruly. The government began in 2002 by blocking around US\$50 million donor funds which were due to Proshika on the basis of alleged '*financial irregularities*', after an audit of Proshika was ordered by the prime minister. This action led the European Union, one of Proshika's main funders, to intervene and raise concerns with the government about the lack of accountability of its investigation, suggesting that an international audit of Proshika's accounts should be undertaken, but this appeal was ignored by the government.

Meanwhile, harassment of Proshika staff and looting of local offices by ruling party activists was reported around the country. This continued at a low level until in May 2004 the President and the Vice-President of Proshika were arrested and held in custody for several weeks, without clear charges being brought, triggering an urgent action appeal from Amnesty International. The government announced that it had clear evidence that Proshika had assisted the opposition party in its election campaign and had diverted donor funds for political purposes, pointing in particular to its work with voter education and its funding of small local NGOs in certain parts of the country. According to The New York Times (25 May 2004), the final straw for the government was the Awami League's statement earlier in 2004 that it would undertake a mass campaign to bring down the government by the end of April and allegations that Proshika would lend its support to such a movement.⁴⁹

49 Q.F. Ahmed was released on 25 July 2004 without any charges having been brought.

At the same time, the government quickly moved to reassert its control over the NGO sector more generally. It began efforts to amend a 1978 Ordinance that regulates donations to NGOs from foreign sources through a new ‘NGO Bill’ which would give the government new powers to intervene in any NGO that it suspected of misusing funds or transgressing the sectoral rules and expectations around NGO participation in politics or business.⁵⁰ The government also set about sidelining ADAB which had, since its foundation in 1974, acted as the NGO umbrella coordinating organization. In practice, ADAB had by the 1990s moved well beyond this coordination role and was now running its own projects and, as in the case of some of the other larger NGOs, funding many small local NGOs around the country. Some argued that ADAB had become less effective by the accumulation of these new roles, and by the emergence of political tensions and wider patronage relations within the NGO sector. In the government’s view, ADAB had ceased to act as a neutral NGO apex body with an ability to coordinate NGO work effectively and it regarded ADAB as a politicized obstacle to building an effective regulatory environment for NGOs. In early 2003, an invitation from the government was issued to development NGOs to attend a meeting intended to create a new alternative NGO forum with which the government could work. This new forum took the form of a brand new organization—the Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB).

As a result, a new ‘government-friendly’ national NGO network was established, with a comprehensively laid out organizational structure that was specifically designed to promote clearer lines of accountability than had previously existed, and with strong barriers to deter party politicization.⁵¹ The Memorandum of Association for the FNB states clearly that “no organization shall be recognized as an NGO if it or any of its office bearers is aligned or associated with any political party in any form whatsoever”.⁵² This issue was given particular prominence because the Proshika President, a known Awami League sympathizer, had himself previously occupied the position of ADAB chair for

50 Another area of controversy in relation to the three sectors has been the issue of whether NGOs such as BRAC, which has an extensive network of not-for-profit businesses, should pay taxes on earnings. Some in the private sector have argued the case of unfair competition.

51 Some suggested that this was open invitation; others that certain NGOs unpopular with the government for their more ‘political’ stance were deliberately excluded from this meeting.

52 Memorandum of Association and Articles of Association, FNB, Dhaka, 30 April 2003, pp. 16.

more than one term.

Caretaker Government and Civil Society

As every Caretaker Government assigned with the responsibility of restoring democracy by conducting free and fair election on the basis of universal adult franchise, the civil society arena also got benefited. The political dilemmas and state's inefficiency directly and indirectly favored the mushroom growth of NGOs in the country. But recent research outcomes indicate that the lack of control and supervision on NGOs led to a situation where NGOs assume the role of a state or a parallel government. This would badly affect the importance of state and its sovereignty. The data of Social Welfare Ministry, NGOAB etc., shows that a considerable and positive change in the number of NGOs during the rule of Caretaker Governments in Bangladesh. In a country like Bangladesh which is beset with poverty, hunger, unemployment, malnutrition, illiteracy, diseases and environmental degradation, of course the role of NGOs is highly recommended. But once it endeavors to cross the limit and interfere the state's areas of activities, state would normally resort to control them.

The Bangladeshi government recently announced a commission to regulate non-governmental organizations (NGOs) adds burdensome procedures that will hinder important watchdog functions. On August 25, 2012, the Bangladeshi government stated it was going to launch a commission to look into the operations of NGOs, claiming that many were involved in terror-financing and other anti-state activities. The government announced at the same time that it had cancelled the registration of some 6,000 NGOs because of links to anti-state activities and is in the process of examining the registration certificates of an additional 4,000.

“The Awami League regularly claims that it is the only political party that will protect democracy and pluralism in Bangladesh, but its attempts to control NGO activity call this into serious question,” said Brad Adams, Asia director at Human Rights Watch. *“If previous governments had attempted to regulate non-governmental organizations in this way, the Awami League would have rightly claimed that this was an attempt to stifle*

*freedom of expression and association.”*⁵³ Human Rights Watch pointed out that Bangladesh already has in place other laws through which terrorist or illegal activities by NGOs and others can be addressed. The criminal law, anti-terror laws, tax law, and existing regulations governing NGO activities already provide a framework to deal with individuals within NGOs or organizations involved in illegal activity. NGOs play a critical role in Bangladesh in areas such as poverty reduction, economic development, health and education, and human rights. The government estimates totally that there are nearly 50,000 active NGOs operating throughout the country.

NGOs operating in Bangladesh already face an overly cumbersome and intrusive regulatory process, including needing multiple approvals to register and to implement projects. NGOs operating in Bangladesh have to clear what the International Centre for Non-Profit Law (ICNL) describes as a process complicated by delays and hurdles, including non-transparency in authorization of registration by the Home Ministry, the police, or the National Security Intelligence. NGOs operating in Bangladesh report long delays and arbitrary refusals at various stages of the approvals process. The NGO Affairs Bureau in the Prime Minister’s office often simply rejects requests for registration or project proposals on arbitrary grounds, at times for apparently political reasons. NGOs have reported to Human Rights Watch that corruption is a major problem, with bribes demanded to gain approval in the NGO Affairs Bureau and at various ministries and local government offices.

It’s a fact that the Bangladeshi government is also on the verge of announcing new laws restricting the receipt of foreign contributions to NGOs. The new law would require several levels of prior government approval for any project which relies in any part on foreign donations. Human Rights Watch has previously criticized the Indian Foreign Contributions Regulation Act, which is very similar to the Bangladeshi draft law, because of the unnecessary burdens it places on foreign contributions for charitable work, as well as other similar laws or draft laws in other countries. The government increasingly acts as

53 Human Rights Watch, “*Bangladesh: Scrap New Commission to Restrict NGOs*”, A Report Published on November 11, 2011. New York.

though it is interested in controlling the NGO sector to a minute level of detail, which will only stifle civil society activity rather than encourage it.

Conclusion

The story of NGOs in giving basic services to the poor is an acclaimed one. But still the question related with the role of civil society in making the political institutions more accountable and transparent to the demands of the people raises doubts on the performance of civil society in Bangladesh. Neo-Tocquevillean school of thought presumes that the more associations there are in a country, the greater the possibility that democratic institutions will improve. It argues that the democratic practices shaped in associational activities will have spillover effects in other contexts and that the same associational structure will operate in similar ways in different socio-economic settings. Such suppositions have profoundly influenced the donor policies towards developing countries.

Berman (1997) and Mosse (2006) warn us that social capital and associationalism are only tools, and they should be considered as politically neutral multipliers. Only if political institutions and structures are capable of channelling and redressing grievances and the existing political regime enjoys public support and legitimacy, then civil society may buttress political stability. In Bangladesh, the two big political parties gain their actual strength and legitimacy through vertical patronage, clientelism, corruption, and violence (Tasnim, 2007). It means that an established political institutionalization should be required to maintain a vibrant civil society. Diamond (1999) is optimistic that civil society movements and actions may break through the undemocratic environment and contribute to a more democratic atmosphere in multiple ways, such as fighting against corruption, nurturing democratic values, bringing an end to clientelism, and forging unity between social cleavages, among others. Bangladesh's case has proved such expectations of a civil society to be unrealistic and normative. Through civil society actions, social capital had been generated but only to some materialistic ends like micro-credit, grassroots development, etc. Civil Society Organizations are in too weak a position to generate democratic values, reduce corruption, or combat clientelism. So, despite the

existence of numerous civic groups, local associations, and clubs at the community level, civil society hardly influenced or contributed to local government decision-making processes or policies, nor did it participate in advocacy or horizontal lobbying efforts.

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