THE PROBLEM OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM IN RURAL BANGLADESH:
THE FAILURE OF SWANIRVAR GRAM SARKAR

by

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Abstract

Since World War II, there have been several attempts to reform local government in rural Bangladesh. They were aimed, among other things, at increasing food production, improving living conditions in the villages, encouraging participation by the villagers in the management of local affairs, and bringing the villages closer to the central government. Most of these objectives have never been attained despite the initiation of various schemes to reform local government. The latest attempt, the Swanirvar Gram Sarkar ("self-reliant village government") scheme launched in 1980 by the government of Ziaur Rahman, is a case in point. This dissertation analyzes the motives which brought Swanirvar Gram Sarkar into existence, and the factors that led to its termination in 1982.

In order to understand the generally chronic failure of local government reforms in developing countries like Bangladesh, it is necessary to consider the existing local government systems in their particular historical contexts, the political circumstances under which reforms are introduced, and the socio-economic conditions prevailing in the localities. A review of the historical evolution of local government in Bangladesh indicates that all of its rulers, both foreign and indigenous, have been reluctant to actually decentralize power. They have designed local institutions in such a way as to ensure control by the centre. Moreover, at the intermediate (district and union) level, rural elites, who have been in control of the existing local government institutions, try to impede the
decentralization of power to the village level. They view new local institutions such as Swanirvar Gram Sarkars as threats, and put up obstacles to prevent their operation. There is yet another explanation for the failure in local government reforms. Even if the government decides to decentralize power, the villages may not be prepared to receive it, since they have not achieved uniform levels of political mobilization.

This dissertation makes use of historical evidence, the findings of previous research, government documents, and field study observation. It provides an in-depth investigation of the politics of three villages representing different regions of Bangladesh. In addition to the historical and national political factors affecting local government reform, conditions in these villages are examined for evidence explaining why Swanirvar Gram Sarkar, with few exceptions, was so unsuccessful.
Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................... ii
List of Maps ....................................................................................................... vii
Acknowledgement ............................................................................................ viii

Chapter I
THE PROBLEMS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM ................................. 1
  PROBLEMS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT ..................................................... 1
  LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN A DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT .................... 5
  LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH: THE GAP IN OUR KNOWLEDGE ........................................................................... 13
  FAILURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS: A WORKING HYPOTHESIS ............................................................. 15
  PURPOSE OF PRESENT STUDY ................................................................. 19
  THE METHOD ............................................................................................... 21
  OUTLINE OF THE STUDY ........................................................................... 23

Chapter II
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH: THE LEGACY OF COLONIAL RULE ............................................................................. 28
  THE COUNTRY .............................................................................................. 30
  TRADITIONAL PATTERN OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT .............................. 32
  VILLAGE SOCIETY UNDER MUGHAL RULE ......................................... 35
  INNOVATION UNDER BRITISH COLONIAL RULE ................................. 37
  REFORMS UNDER PAKISTANI RULE ..................................................... 48

Chapter III
LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH: THE GENESIS OF GRAM SARKAR ...................................................................................... 62
  RURAL DEVELOPMENT: STRATEGIES AND RESULTS ......................... 69
  THE SWANIRVAR MOVEMENT .................................................................. 72
  LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE POLITICAL SCENE, 1975-80 ............. 81
Chapter IV
GRAM SARKAR IN THE POLITICAL CONTEXT: LEGISLATION, STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS ................................................. 91

THE EMERGENCE OF ZIA .................................................. 91
THE BANGLADESH NATIONALIST PARTY ............................. 95
THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SWANIRVAR GRAM SARKAR ......... 102
PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL AND LEGISLATION ............... 105
SOME OBSERVATIONS .................................................... 110

Chapter V
ISOLATION AND INACTION: GRAM SARKAR IN MANTALA, MYMENSINGH ................................................................. 121
THE VILLAGE .................................................................. 121
TRADITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ................................. 128
SWANIRVAR GRAM SARKAR ............................................ 129
AN OVERVIEW .............................................................. 136

Chapter VI
NEW LEADERSHIP AND DOMINATION: GRAM SARKAR IN COLIPUR, COMILLA ............................................................. 144
THE VILLAGE .................................................................. 144
TRADITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ................................. 150
SWANIRVAR GRAM SARKAR ............................................ 155
AN OVERVIEW .............................................................. 163

Chapter VII
FACTIONALISM AND VILLAGE LEADERSHIP: GRAM SARKAR IN RAINAGAR, RAJSHAHI ..................................................... 170
THE VILLAGE .................................................................. 171
TRADITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT ................................. 177
SWANIRVAR GRAM SARKAR ............................................ 178
AN OVERVIEW .............................................................. 185

Chapter VIII
GRAM SARKAR IN PRACTICE: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW ....... 193
HISTORY ....................................................................... 194
List of Maps

MAP 1. BANGLADESH: ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICTS ..... 29a
MAP 2. MYMENSINGH DISTRICT ......................... 121a
MAP 3. COMILLA DISTRICT ............................. 144a
MAP 4. RAJSHAHI DISTRICT ........................... 170a
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I. THE PROBLEMS OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORM

PROBLEMS IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In most new states, local governments are beset with innumerable problems. These stem from various sources. The experience of many developing nations provide ample evidence that they "have suffered for long periods from a breakdown in local and national bureaucracy so that local services are not rendered and a semi-anarchic confusion prevails."¹ Traditional values in religion and social organization work against rational bureaucratization and the extension of power by the new central political parties of the developing nations.² Such problems, along with the ever present scarcity of material and financial resources, act as general deterrents to reforms in local government. Although conscious attempts are made to bring about changes in response to local demands and needs, such changes are seldom successful in developing countries. There are historical causes for such failures. Harold Alderfer has pointed out that in the pre-independence period, local governments were either neglected or received half-hearted attention while the colonial rulers concentrated upon maintaining control over the centre.³ But such centralist tendencies have persisted even after these countries have become independent and native politicians have assumed power.

The case of Bangladesh is typical of such countries. Bangladesh was born in 1971 after the eastern wing of Pakistan pulled out of the federation following a war of independence.
One of the causes of Pakistan's break-up was the strained relationship between the centre and the units resulting from increased centralization of authority. After independence, Bangladesh was nevertheless organized as a unitary state. This seemed logical because of the country's small size and linguistic-cultural homogeneity, and also necessary in view of the severe dislocation caused by its war of independence. Yet the relationship between the capital, Dhaka, and the subordinate levels of government in the districts, subdivisions, and thanas was not very close. In particular, the lowest, yet from a developmental point of view most important level, the villages, appeared to be isolated from the centre's political and administrative activities. By the end of the 1970s, a local government programme covering the entire country was deemed essential for the improvement of administration and the accomplishment of the tasks of development.

Local government systems have operated in Bangladesh (previously East Pakistan, and before that, East Bengal) for a considerable length of time. In the past, local institutions have generally failed to provide the necessary services to the community or to satisfy the people's desire to participate in local government. Various British, Pakistani and Bangladeshi governments tried to introduce changes in local government. The reorganization of local bodies usually developed out of two needs: first, the need to elicit support for the ruling groups; and second, to satisfy the local people's demands for participating in political and administrative affairs. But
attempts at reorganization were generally of no consequence in practice and all "reforms" proved futile. Conditions in the villages remained unchanged and political participation at the lowest level remained limited.

Although the leaders of most newly independent countries have usually advocated complete breaks with the past, these have not generally been achieved due to a number of reasons. Failures are especially apparent in the case of the reorganization or building up of a new structure of local government and administration. Local government in the colonial days was closely supervised by colonial officials and native administrators. They performed mainly "system maintenance" roles, such as keeping law and order and collecting revenue. After independence, a return to the pre-colonial "indigenous" local government system was not usually feasible because colonial rule had undermined or destroyed the old systems. The new rulers also considered the old systems, which were tradition-bound and undemocratic, to be incapable of dealing with the conditions prevailing after independence. These and other reasons help explain why the colonial systems of local government were not terminated after independence in developing countries.

Conscious efforts were made in Pakistan to improve the quality of local government performance, but most ended up as mere assertions from the centre about the desirability of initiating and carrying out certain local activities. After the independence of Bangladesh in 1971, little attention was paid to
local government reforms, and the pre-independence system was allowed to continue. By the end of the decade, however, the ailing agrarian economy of Bangladesh called for rapid development, and the government led by the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) introduced *Swanirvar Gram Sarkar* (self-reliant village governments).

The Local Government (Amendment) Act 1980 which provided for the constitution of *Swanirvar Gram Sarkar* in Bangladesh was passed in the *Jatiya Sangsad* (National Assembly) on June 21, 1980. The Minister for Local Government, Captain (Retired) Abdul Halim Choudhury who moved the Bill in the House said that through the establishment of *Swanirvar Gram Sarkar*, the country would attain "self-sufficiency and prosperity." *Gram Sarkar* councils were to be set up in the villages of Bangladesh in order to tackle a number of basic developmental problems such as food production, education, health and welfare, law and order, and the village economy. *Gram Sarkars* were expected to pool the resources and talents of various groups in the villages, and to facilitate their participation in the "nation-building" process from the grass roots. These village-based units of eleven members were to be headed by a *Gram Pradhan* (village head). The *Gram Sarkar* was to be chosen through negotiation and reconciliation in an assembly of the *Gram Shava* (a meeting of the villagers) which could be attended by all adult residents of the village. The assemblies were directed to ensure representation of the various classes and professions in keeping with the demographic nature of the village concerned.⁵
On July 10, 1982, in exercise of the powers conferred under Section 86 of the Local Government Ordinance, 1976 (XC of 1976), the military government, that had come into power only three months earlier, repealed the Swanirvar Gram Sarkar (Constitution and Administration) Rules, 1980, and Gram Sarkars stood abolished. The Minister for Local Government, Mahbubur Rahman, said that the action was taken "because the Gram Sarkar was too small a unit to be viable and effective to work with separate entity and autonomy." He also said it had been clear from public opinion as well as government records and experience "that Gram Sarkar failed to carry out the functions assigned to it and its continuation might not deliver the desired result."

The declaration terminated yet another experiment aimed at reforming local government in the rural areas. Most reform attempts in Bangladesh have either fizzled out at the planning stage, or, like this one, have been suspended with the changes in government which have been frequent in the country. The causes behind this record of continual failure merit investigation.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN A DEVELOPMENTAL CONTEXT

In order to understand the particular dilemma of local government reform in Bangladesh, it is necessary to recognize that local governments face certain universal problems. First, for the purpose of defining our central concept, we need to
recognize that there may be various levels of local government in a country which are set up in accordance with the organization of the administrative process. Local government institutions are administrative units which have the authority to decide and implement certain limited types of public policies within a territory demarcated for these purposes by the central government. Usually, they have general jurisdiction covering a defined range of services. Local government may include the lowest level of the central governmental departments or agencies that operate in specific areas. The term is also used to refer to representative or selected bodies which serve similar purposes in a locality, although the elected bodies are often distinguished by using the term "local self-government."

The conditions under which local governments function in developing countries can be better understood by examining the relationship between the central and local governments. While local government institutions are set up for the management of local affairs, central governments are reluctant to allow adequate autonomy to these bodies. The usual reason put forward by the central government in each case is the concern for a guarantee of certain minimum standards, but this concern results in a weak "sense of responsibility of the local people for the proper handling of local affairs." As Humes and Martin have noted, local government units can never be more than junior partners in their relationships with the central government. Moreover, central governments will "not only be reluctant to establish a local government system that might create power
centres capable of competing with or effectively opposing the central government", they will also seek to organize local units in such a way that will weaken existing alternative power centres. The ruling elite is often apprehensive that once the local bodies become powerful, they may become formidable weapons in the hands of opposition groups, who may use these bodies to challenge the rulers. With a strongly centralized system, it is easy for the rulers to exercise control over the centre, and dominate the outlying areas through it. The rulers' lack of trust cannot be demonstrated in the open because it would alienate the local population.

But the problem facing the rulers in developing countries is not only one of controlling villages. They have to secure the active support of the rural electorate at the same time. To achieve this end, the rulers recognize the merit in creating local government institutions which ostensibly promote popular participation and allow decisions to be made locally. The actual amount of authority they allow the local bodies to enjoy is extremely limited, however, and central control is exercised through government officials. Thus central government rulers often reform local government on paper and create new structures for managing local affairs. Yet they do not delegate enough authority for these institutions to operate effectively.

Centralized control over local government is useful in bringing political benefits to the national ruling party. Schultz has pointed out the ability of the Japanese national elite to influence local politics by manipulating the allocation
of public resources. \(^\text{10}\) But the main purpose of the patronage is to garner support for the national party. Local government members of a political party do not usually group together as closely as do their counterparts at the national level, yet they can build up personal followings which are directly influenced by them. \(^\text{11}\) The followings are usually retained through patronage networks based on land, wealth, family connections, and the ability of the leaders to help their followers. From the standpoint of central elites, such leaders and their followings can be utilized effectively to build up support for a political party. Moreover, controlled decentralization of authority may satisfy the growing demand for participation in governmental affairs, at least at the local level, and as well provide a useful device by which to reduce local resistance to central authority. Although the patterns of local government operations differ across the new states, in general, "the needs for economic growth and the extension of new national power to the hinterlands" produce the tendency to continue as much central control as the regime finds possible. \(^\text{12}\) As a result, local government institutions fail to deliver the desired results.

Developing nations face huge and increasing financial deficits and the available funds are inadequate to even continue the established programmes. New local government bodies are totally dependent on central government allocations for survival. The centre exercises more control and may demand support from local leaders in return for funds. Very little is achieved because programmes cannot be planned and executed
without the consent and assistance of the centre. The local population and the leaders of elected councils become frustrated because they feel themselves "unable to perform their tasks satisfactorily." The local inhabitants realize that nothing can be accomplished by such institutions, and fall back on the patronage of local influentials, whose place in the locality is thus made even stronger.

Such local powerholders become firmly established over generations on the basis of family, kinship ties, land and wealth. They almost automatically assume control of local government. This situation was not disturbed by the colonial rulers. The authority of local influentials was accepted by the local inhabitants and went unchallenged. Independence did not result in immediate changes in these areas, but gradually demands were raised for changes. The attempt by governments to reform local institutions was viewed with suspicion by these leaders, and they reacted in two ways. They either joined the new councils and assumed control, or resisted the operation of these councils from the outside. In both cases, the result was the non-achievement of the objectives of local government reforms.

Thus, changes in local government have generally strengthened the hold of existing local elites over the rural areas. Their power increased as they gained control of the new local government institutions at the intermediate levels. The tussle for power and control between the central ruling elites and such local leaders often results in non-cooperation and
resistance by the latter group. People who are exercising control over local communities view any attempt at change as a threat to their dominance. Local government reform is bound to antagonize these leaders "as it alters the power structure of the community and thereby arouses groups or individuals who feel that their interests or power positions will be affected." The rural elites, therefore, make all efforts to prevent power from trickling down to the lowest levels.

The centre-locality relationship influences, and is shaped by, the degree of preparedness of the villages to receive power. Low levels of literacy and the lack of facilities for training local leaders are two continuing problems. With regard to the latter, Leemans discussed the tendency of central governments to exercise more control by pooling the available manpower resources and using them optimally. Most reforms are geared to development activities, and therefore, require an extension of local bodies and more personnel to operate them. In general, however, extremely low levels of participation in local affairs have resulted in a dearth of new qualified local leaders. The available leaders are unable to challenge the traditional influentials and are either ousted from local bodies or become dependent on the local influentials for making the new institutions work. The fate of reformed local government, in effect, is decided by the attitude of the local influentials toward it.

The quality of local leadership, level of literacy, extent of participation in local affairs, and the strength of links
with intermediate power centres are some important aspects in which villages differ among themselves in Bangladesh. These features can collectively be considered as the outcome of differing political mobilization. The process of mobilization involves the growth of an "attitudinal commitment to action," and "a means of translating commitment into action or observed behaviour." This end is achieved through several stages and marks the beginning of a transition to modernity where "traditional orientations and ties have begun to be broken down and large numbers of individuals have become available for new patterns of life and thought." Since the degree of mobilization is a significant manifestation of differences among the villages of an otherwise homogeneous country, it will be used as a basis to compare the degree of preparedness achieved by each village under study. It is essential to understand the degree of mobilization that has taken place in the villages, and its contribution towards the preparation of the localities to receive and utilize power.

Attention must also be paid to factional relationships and interactions among local influentials and their followers in order to study politics and administration in the rural areas of Bangladesh. Factions are informal groups that develop on the basis of needs that can be fulfilled by a leader for his followers. Local inhabitants ally themselves with the leader who is most capable of helping them out in return for their support in his bid to exercise control over local affairs. Nicholas points out that factions are political groups whose
members are recruited on diverse principles, such as kinship ties, patron-client relations, mutual interest and religious and politico-economic bonds.  

Factionalism affects the operation of local government institutions in several ways. Bailey stated that factions often lead to total stalemate in local councils, and the panchayats in India "appear as arenas where there is an endless disputation about decisions which are seldom taken, and, if taken, rarely implemented." Nicholas found that factions perform the "necessary functions in organizing conflict." Although the tie between the leader and his followers is based upon personal transactions between them, Islam argued that "factional conflicts do not impede decision making but rather help to implement or reject decisions." Islam's anthropological study centres around informal village bodies which are controlled by powerful villagers. Formally constituted local government bodies can be rendered ineffective if the faction in control of such bodies cannot neutralize local influentials who do not join them.

Nicholas listed caste, neighbourhood, economics and kinship as major factors on which Indian village factions develop. In Bangladesh, economics and kinship have emerged as the important factors. A faction leader's influence in the village is also dependent on his contacts outside the village. Links with the ruling political party are cultivated by ambitious leaders. But factionalism in the villages may hinder reforms because factions are interested in their own objects rather than those of the
society as a whole.  

LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH: THE GAP IN OUR KNOWLEDGE

There has been a barrage of studies dealing with the emergence of Bangladesh, but very few studies have been undertaken to analyze post-independence political development. Studies by Jahan, Barua, Maniruzzaman and Franda essentially deal with national political events and, if at all, mention local government only in passing. There are a few Bangladesh village studies, but none of these is directly concerned with local government at the village level. Ramkrishna Mukherjee published the results of an economic inquiry undertaken in six villages of Bogra district in Bangladesh (then East Bengal) during 1943-45. Hafeez Zaidi reported the results of an attitudinal study of villagers in Comilla district. Bertocci focussed on social structure and community organizations in rural East Pakistan which he analyzed by conducting research in two villages in Comilla district. An extremely well done anthropological study, Elusive Villages by Bertocci, places relatively less emphasis on political power relationships as compared to cultural, economic and ecological factors. The "Comilla Experiment" is the subject of Raper's Rural Development in Action. The book includes an impressive amount of detail which is useful for understanding specific developmental programmes, but fails almost completely to deal with the broad
social, economic and political significance of the many programmes initiated at Comilla. Islam offers an "anthropological study of politics" which deals principally with factionalism in a village in the district of Dhaka. The study touches on the actual political processes in the village, and shows the manner in which party politics at the higher levels gradually reach the countryside. Unfortunately, Islam's study pays little attention to local government institutions or at any attempt to reform the system of local government.

The number of works on local government in Bangladesh are fewer still. Rashiduzzaman has written about politics in local councils in East Pakistan. Tepper has investigated the evolution of administration in rural East Pakistan, and pointed out that changes occurred more "in nomenclature than in substance." While Rahman and Sobhan have studied the operation of Basic Democracy in East Pakistan, Nicholson and Khan considered its role in rural development in West Pakistan. None of these works deals with the situation that is prevalent in Bangladesh at present. It is only with the Swanirvar Gram Sarkar scheme that local government was instituted at the village level in Bangladesh. None of the foregoing studies penetrates below the union level.

Abedin has included Bangladesh in his analysis of local administration and politics in modernizing societies, but his study does not cover village level activities. Focussing on administration at the district and subdivision levels, Abedin analyzed the local administration prevailing in undivided
Pakistan. Local government in Bangladesh at the time was more or less similar to the system in Pakistan. Zaman studied three villages in Bangladesh and concluded that factional cleavages not only hinder change, but "tend to help preserve status quo in the community." This is the result of rival factions fighting "for control over resources, power and status as available within the existing framework of the society rather than for changes in the social structure."

This dissertation is expected to provide a building block for studying local government in Bangladesh. At present, scholars intending to investigate the topic are unable to draw upon systematic information on the history of local government reforms in Bangladesh, their outcome and consequences, and particularly, the political factors contributing to their failure. There are no organized data on the system of Gram Sarkar, its structure, functions, modes of operation and its abolition. These are the voids in the literature which this dissertation aims to fill.

FAILURE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT REFORMS: A WORKING HYPOTHESIS

"Failure" implies the "non-achievement of goals or objectives". A discrepancy between the stated objectives of the government that introduced a reform in local government and its outcome could be considered a failure. In their efforts to build up support for the ruling group, governments often devise
plans with grandiose objectives which are not attainable within fixed periods. Another possibility is that a reform may fail in achieving greater local participation and other developmental objectives, but succeed in creating, at least temporarily, mass support for an incumbent regime.

If government rhetoric is not used as a standard of measurement, however, it may be possible to detect some progress in local government, even though it may fall far short of the stated objectives. The mere establishment of a local council where there was none before, the initiation of some local projects, however small, and the opportunity for the citizens to participate in local affairs may be considered positive consequences. These are indications, at least, of progress on which future systems can be built. From this point of view, local government reform attempts are never totally wasted. In this dissertation, I have generally tried to assess "success" and "failure" with these considerations in mind: 1) the objectives/outcome disparity; 2) the rhetoric/realpolitik disparity; and 3) the short-range/long-range perspective.

On the basis of the wider theoretical literature and that pertaining only to Bangladesh, I would now propose the following general argument as an explanation for the failure of local government reform in Bangladesh. Local government institutions are essential to facilitate administration in the rural areas. These bodies can also be used to secure support for ruling groups, and satisfy the villagers' desire to participate in local affairs. Failure to attain development through strong
centralized administration leads the rulers to believe that
decentralization is the solution to administrative problems.
The development of electoral politics, concurrently, compels the
rulers to seek support of the overwhelmingly rural electorate in
order to continue in power. When new political parties try to
establish a power base, the rural constituency can be won over
by reforming local government institutions and rewarding the
recruits with places in local bodies. Thus the ruling group
appeals directly to the local influentials for support in return
for a place in local government institutions.

As a result of faulty planning, and because they seek to
achieve goals that are unrealistic, Bangladesh's governments
continually run into innumerable difficulties in the
implementation of reforms in local government. The plans are
kept vague, so that the local bodies can be organized and run in
several ways to suit the convenience of the rulers. This
results in widely differing practices in different areas. The
inability of governments to standardize procedures affects the
coordination of the system. Party affiliations become
irrelevant, and control of local bodies remains with those
people who have the ability to help and control the local
population. Local leaders find that expressing support for the
ruling political party brings dividends in closer contacts with
the rulers and associated benefits. They need not reveal their
political preferences, and generally, they try to avoid
confrontation with the ruling party. The local population
observes that the influentials benefit from such reforms, and
continue to avoid the new local government institutions. At the lowest level, political mobilization affects the operation of local government institutions. Local influentials strive to retain their clients, and their success in such efforts makes them invaluable to the ruling group. The attempts to recruit more members for factions often impede the operation of local institutions. Village factions fight one another, and the group in control of these bodies usually succumb to pressures from those who are not. This conflict occurs because only a handful of loyal supporters can be accommodated in the councils. Generally, there is a larger dissatisfied group, which will spare no opportunity to discredit the leaders in office. The weaker groups seek to obtain control by declaring alliance with the party in power. While local influentials do not always require a national political party label to maintain their leadership, the ruling group without a sound political base depends on the support of these leaders to continue in power. Changes in local government systems are generally geared to achieve such alliances and the stated purpose of improving local administration is not achieved.
PURPOSE OF PRESENT STUDY

This dissertation aims to identify and analyze the causes of continual failure to bring about changes in the local government system of rural Bangladesh. The inquiry will cover the period of colonial rule by Great Britain and later Pakistan, and, as well, the post independence period of rule by the Awami League (AL). The Bangladesh case will be tested against a number of socio-economic and political explanations current in the developmental literature which account for failures in reforming local government institutions. The main body of the dissertation, however, will analyze the attempt of the government of Bangladesh under the leadership of President Ziaur Rahman to deal with local government problems by instituting Gram Sarkar.

Gram Sarkars, the new village councils, were expected to extend local government beyond the previous lowest level, Union Parishad. Prior to the establishment of Gram Sarkar, the Union Parishad, which covered a number of villages (five to fifteen) was the lowest level in the local government system existing in Bangladesh, and there were no village-based units. Gradually, the villages started to be recognized as important units and emphasis was being put upon building the system from the grass roots. The village level organization of Gram Sarkar was expected to bring local government closer to the people, enabling them to participate in local affairs. My study of Gram Sarkar in Bangladesh aims to discover the differences, if any, between this reform attempt and previous reforms in the same
area.

As well, I will review the evolution of the Gram Sarkar scheme and examine the circumstances under which it was introduced. This will explain the intent behind its introduction. However, the structures, functions and effectiveness of the Gram Sarkar must be analyzed to determine whether they were able to accomplish the political and administrative purposes for which they were established.

The major questions to which this study seeks answers are: Under what circumstances were local government reforms introduced in Bangladesh in the past? What was expected to be achieved through such reforms? To what extent were these attempts successful? Why did Zia's government introduce the Gram Sarkar scheme? Was the strategy aimed principally at consolidating and legitimizing Zia's regime? How effectively could the system link localities with the capital? Who were the people involved in the system? What were the costs to and benefits for the participants? Did Gram Sarkar have any effect on the quality of local administration? Why did the system not continue beyond the BNP rule? What did the BNP ultimately gain? Did the Gram Sarkars play a significant role in the national politics of Bangladesh? What are the likely consequences of the failure of the Gram Sarkar reform?
THE METHOD

I have used secondary published materials as well as government documents to analyze the failure of local government reforms in Bangladesh. While this exercise was immensely beneficial to reach conclusions about past efforts, the recent developments had to be studied in the field. I undertook a trip to Bangladesh in the summer of 1982 with the intention of collecting data both from the central government and the villages. The time was appropriate because Gram Sarkar had been in operation since 1980, and I expected some effects of the new institution to be visible.

Martial Law was declared a week before I arrived in Bangladesh. This created some problems that I had not anticipated; for example, I was not able to interview politicians and civil servants as freely as I would have liked. Despite the tense situation in the capital, Dhaka, however, I had little trouble in collecting adequate information on the new Gram Sarkar scheme. In any case, I had decided to concentrate most of my research activities in the villages. Although the tension had reached the countryside, too, and some villagers were wary of a stranger asking questions about their political inclinations and economic and social conditions, I was ultimately able to overcome this handicap.

I decided to conduct surveys among Gram Sarkar members in three different villages of the country. My hope was that such surveys would reveal the real nature of political and administrative activities going on under the new system. I
decided that in addition to the "macro" perspective on local government reform that can be obtained in Dhaka, I needed to acquire the "micro" insights that can only be found in the villages themselves. The selection of the villages was made with the intention of representing various regions of Bangladesh. The districts of Mymensingh, Comilla and Rajshahi represent the north-central, south-eastern, and western regions of the country respectively. The actual names of the villages and their leaders have not been mentioned in this study. I have used the fictitious names of Mantala, Colipur and Rainagar to describe three villages in the districts of Mymensingh, Comilla and Rajshahi. I have tried to include villages which have achieved different levels of political mobilization, hoping that they could be used to reach conclusions about other villages in Bangladesh.

The villages were chosen with some consideration given to accessibility and the availability of data. I spent about a month in each of the villages in the summer of 1982. During my stay in the villages, I had the opportunity of talking with the villagers and local leaders, attending their meetings, and observing the settlement of local disputes by the village leaders. I enlisted the help of some local residents in Mantala, and students who lived in the other two villages. The local contacts gave me easy access to the village leaders, and their office files, where they existed. I was able to interview the personnel involved with the new local bodies and analyze their roles in the villages. The information derived from this
exercise will be utilized to explain the chronic failure of reforms in local government in Bangladesh.

Gram Sarkars were almost inoperative by the spring of 1982 and were officially abolished in July 1982. I was still conducting my surveys in the villages at the time. This gave me an opportunity to observe the reactions of the villagers to the demise of the only village-based local body in the history of Bangladesh. They were more vocal in their criticisms because the government was no longer supporting the Gram Sarkars. This was convenient for my study because both the initiation and termination of Gram Sarkar could be covered.

OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

The study is divided into seven substantial sections in addition to an introduction and a conclusion. In Chapter II, the history of the problems of local government in Bangladesh is reviewed with special attention to reform attempts and their consequences. Chapter III explores the political antecedents of Gram Sarkar by examining the decline of the Awami League (AL) and the growth of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) as political parties, and tries to ascertain the position of the BNP in the political system. The circumstances under which the BNP government decided to introduce Gram Sarkar are discussed. The next chapter looks at the legislation of Gram Sarkar in the political context and investigates the introduction of the
concept of Gram Sarkar, and its relationship with the policies of the BNP. The structure, functions and potential of Gram Sarkar are analyzed. Chapter V describes Gram Sarkar in Mantala, a village of Mymensingh district in Bangladesh, where a low level of political development has left the traditional power structure undisturbed. Chapter VI presents the story of Colipur, a village in Comilla district. Development activities have been initiated, and the dominant family has split into factions. Rainagar, a village in Rajshahi district is studied in Chapter VII. This is a peri-urban community which has close links with national and district level politics. These cases, although by no means representative of all the villages in Bangladesh, illustrate the various effects of the reform attempts in some typical Bangladesh villages. In Chapter VIII, the cases are compared and important findings highlighted. The final chapter attempts to bring together the findings of all the previous chapters in the course of answering the research questions raised earlier.
NOTES


4 The Bangladesh Observer, June 22, 1980. In this dissertation, I will use the term Gram Sarkar to denote Swanirvar Gram Sarkar, the village institution set up under the Local Government (Amendment) Act, 1980.


8 Ibid., p. 49.


12 Lockard, op.cit. , p. 458.

13 Leemans, op.cit , p. 48.

14 Ibid. , p. 38.

15 Ibid. , pp. 48-9.


20 R. W. Nicholas, op. cit., p. 47.


27 Ramkrishna Mukherjee, Six Villages of Bengal (Bombay: Popular Prakashan, 1971).


39 The term is used to describe villages which are located in the periphery of urban areas. The villages and "the way in which people go about their business appears to be fairly rural", but actually they are exposed to a considerable degree of urban influence. See the Introduction in A. H. Somjee, ed., Politics of a Periurban Community in India (London: Asia Publishing House, 1964), pp. 1-15.
II. LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH: THE LEGACY OF COLONIAL RULE

The history of local government in Bangladesh is replete with instances of central governments jealously retaining their control over local bodies. There were periodic announcements in favour of decentralization, but they turned out to be mere rhetoric, intended to appease the native population. The actual steps taken by the governments resulted in stronger centralization.

The area which is now known as Bangladesh was colonized for a long period of time by the British East India Company and the British Crown. Foreign domination continued under Pakistani rule. None of the foreign rulers made efforts to make local government institutions democratic and delegate authority to the lowest levels. The British felt that the natives were not capable of running local government bodies. Another probable reason was the fear of losing control following complete decentralization. The tendency to withhold control was evident in the various schemes of reforming local government that were undertaken by the British. They announced plans to make local government institutions autonomous, and to encourage participation by the natives. But these plans were never implemented in full. The native nationalists, the British believed, would assume control of local institutions and organize resistance to foreign rule. There were a number of Acts, Rules and Resolutions dealing with local government, but these resulted in small variations in the existing system. This trend continued through the Pakistani period, when government
officials exercised increased control over local institutions. After the end of foreign domination, local government continued to be neglected. The trend of retaining control of local government institutions through public officials remained, and most changes suggested in local government resembled those from the colonial days.

The growth of a nation-wide local government system in Bangladesh occurred over a relatively short period of time. Conscious efforts at reforming indigenous practices started only during the later period of British rule. However, as colonial masters, neither the British nor the Pakistanis wanted to bring about radical changes in the local government system which might lead to movements to free the country. They preferred the safer route of appealing to the powerful and better-off local leaders for support. Withholding control of local bodies and looking after the interests of the traditionally dominant groups continued on the excuse that there was an inadequate supply of qualified leaders and resources to run local government efficiently. In the later days of Pakistani rule, some attempts were made at rural development through local projects, and the availability of resources at the local level resulted in competition among groups. In summary, the legacy of colonial rule prevailed even after the departure of the foreign rulers. Urban political elites secured control of the country, and local government institutions in the rural areas were neglected.
MAP 1. BANGLADESH: ADMINISTRATIVE DISTRICTS

- International boundary
- Divisional boundary
- District boundary
THE COUNTRY

The part of South Asia's land-mass which is presently known as Bangladesh has been inhabited for thousands of years. The state of Bangladesh has been established in a section of the Bengal delta that lies at the cross-roads of southwest and southeast Asia. The area has been affected by Arabian, Persian and Turkish influences "in religious architecture, some art forms, ceremonial food, some of the clothing and many words of the Bengali vocabulary." It has similarity with southeast Asia in the staple diet of the people consisting of rice and fish, and in the hot, humid, tropical climate. There has been a stronger southwest Asian influence due to the conversion of large numbers of Bengalis to Islam following repeated Muslim invasions since the early days. The Bengalis were for centuries part of the population of India, and therefore, share much culturally with the predominantly Hindu Indians -- especially with regard to the social aspects of rural life.

Bangladesh covers an area of approximately 55,126 square miles and is inhabited by a little less than ninety million people. The average size of a family is 5.74 persons and the annual rate of population increase is 2.36 per cent. Excluding the area covered by water, the average density of population is 1,675 persons per square mile. The country is composed principally of a vast alluvial plain, criss-crossed by the Ganges and Brahmaputra rivers and their numerous tributaries. Bangladesh receives heavy monsoon rains during June, July and August. The temperature is high for about eight months of the
year, and the range of variation is small in the winter. The small range of variation in temperature, seasonal rainfall, and the fertile alluvial soil are of direct significance to the nature of agriculture. Due to lack of irrigation facilities, rain at the right time is crucial for the crops among which rice, jute, sugar-cane and oilseeds are the most important. There are three crop seasons in Bangladesh: aghani or haimantic (the cold weather, November-December), rabi (the crops sown in winter but reaped in early summer, February-March), and bhadoi or kharif (crops belonging to the rainy season, July-September). A deviation from the normal seasonal rainfall upsets the balance and the major crops of paddy and jute are immediately affected causing economic difficulties. Crop fluctuations are reflected in distress in the vast rural community.

The number of urban residents at present comprise fourteen per cent of the population of Bangladesh, compared to nine per cent in 1974. The majority of the people still live in the rural areas in villages, whose patterns have been influenced by the topography and climate. The frequent flooding of the fields in the rainy season has forced people to live in rural settlements on higher ground or to raise the land artificially for their homesteads. In some areas, river embankments and levees form high grounds and linear settlements can be found. In other areas, the linear tendency is there, "but there are single or clusters of homesteads away from them." The nucleated settlement pattern is found in areas inhabited by the tribal
people, and semi-nucleated settlements are rare. Most of the early settlements centered around cultivable land, and clusters of homesteads gradually developed into small village communities.

**TRADITIONAL PATTERN OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

Since prehistoric times, the fertile lands of the Bengal delta attracted settlers belonging to various races from different parts of Asia, but no organized data are available on the original nature of the rural community. Sir W.W. Hunter has lamented the lack of records on the rural history of Bengal. However, archaeological sources that do exist make it possible to reconstruct a picture of rural Bengal prior to the arrival of the British on the subcontinent.

Due to the nature of the soil and abundance of rain, agriculture became the predominant occupation of the settlers. The need to live close to the land that was cultivated resulted in more and more settlements in the fertile plains. Generally, the homesites were strung out in long ribbon-like villages along the natural dikes thrown up by the rivers. The dikes would help the efforts of the settlers to raise their homes above the annual flood level. In other areas, the homesteads were grouped around excavated ponds or tanks, with a series of tank-centered housing sites making up a village. There seemed to be little difference from the villages of ancient India described by
Alderfer. "Population tended to be from five hundred to a thousand, houses built close together, isolation from the outside world almost complete, village affairs governed by custom, community leadership in the hands of a council of elders and perhaps a headman."  

Each village was within its own limits "autonomous and self-sufficient, governed by its own elected officers, satisfying its own needs, providing for its own education, police, tribunal, all its economic necessities and functions, managing itself its own life as an independent and self-governing unit." Village government operated through a headman and an assembly of the villagers.

The ancient kingdoms of the Mauryas, the Guptas and the Palas had their power base in the Bengal-Bihar area. During the reign of the Palas, Buddhism received the rulers' patronage, but in the subsequent years, a strong Brahmanical Hinduism emphasizing caste distinctions emerged. The Muslim conquerors invaded Bengal in the early thirteenth century and more immigration by Turks, Arabs and Persians took place.

Over centuries, the settlements had evolved into self-sufficient village communities consisting mostly of agriculturists as well as other groups such as weavers, fishermen, carpenters, blacksmiths, washermen, and potters. According to Mazumdar, Raychaudhuri and Dutta, "village communities continued unaffected by the establishment of a new government in the country." There were a number of reasons for this. Villages were self-contained units and poor communication
and transportation facilities impeded efficient administration by the rulers.

The capital of the rulers of Bengal changed several times through these years. Sonargaon (near Dhaka), Pandua (near Maldah), Nuddeah (also known as Nadia), and Gaur (also called Lucknowty) served as the capitals under the various independent Muslim and Hindu rulers. At the centre of government, the rulers had to pay attention to the problems in their immediate surroundings, and were thus unable to provide any services or protection to the villages. The village headman was expected to collect revenue from the villagers and send it to the capital. In cases of failure by the headman, the king sent his troops to collect. Apart from this, the rulers did not interfere in the affairs of the village. There was little transaction between the village and the outside world. There were no demands for change, nor did the village leaders consider it necessary to include other social or occupational groups in the informal bodies that managed local affairs. Factionalism did not emerge as a major problem due to the small size of village communities, close ties among village leaders, and the lack of tangible commodities for which to compete. The administrative system of Bengal was not organized well enough to cover the remote villages and establish a uniform local government system.

Another important aspect of rural life in the area was the relationship between the two major religious groups, the Hindus and the Muslims. Hinduism had been the dominant faith with periodic challenges from Buddhism. Since the thirteenth
century, large scale conversions to Islam took place under the Muslim rulers. The majority of converts were from the lower castes. Religious pluralism was accepted as a fact of life in rural East Bengal where the landlords were usually members of the high-caste Hindu community. The tenants were both Hindus and Muslims. However, communal tension had not become prominent yet. The various occupational groups depended on one another's products or services for survival. Production was essentially for direct consumption only and there was no home or external market for agricultural produce.¹³

VILLAGE SOCIETY UNDER MUGHAL RULE

The Mughals conquered India in the fifteenth century, but Bengal only became a province of the empire in 1576. The Mughals set up an organized and efficient system of administration by creating administrative units of provinces further divided into districts. The centres of administration were decided upon by the rulers on various grounds, the most important being strategic. These centres later developed into small cities. The Mughals were essentially an urban people in India, and "their most distinctive achievements in the sphere of local government were in urban administration."¹⁴ An overwhelming percentage of the population lived in villages and were isolated from the urban areas. The effects of urban administrative changes did not trickle down to the villages.
The village was a small world of its own. The village society would make its own laws and decisions. It was the danger of external invasion and the need for security from outlaws which produced village organization and unity. The Mughals set up a revenue collecting system with several officials at various levels from the district to the villages, and "these officials derived income either from rights to a fixed share in the revenue or from claims to certain fees which could be deducted from the revenue collected." The revenue collectors thus had direct incentives and were often ruthless in performing their duties. The villagers began to feel the pressure. The state did not make any effort to regulate local affairs. For all practical purposes, such control was exercised by the village councils, known as panchayats.

The panchayats, literally meaning a body of five persons, were usually composed of villagers belonging to higher castes and the wealthy cultivators. Village officers and servants were answerable to the panchayats. The bodies were not representative of the entire village as small farmers, landless labourers and members of the lower castes had practically no say in the affairs of the village. Panchayats supervised almost all common activities in the village and levied taxes. Thus, village bodies, constituted mostly on the basis of hereditary privilege and restricted in scope, continued to manage the affairs of the villages. The influential people in the villages aimed to keep the government at the centre satisfied by raising the revenue, and in exchange enjoyed a free hand in running the
villages. The government, too, did not realise the need to broaden the base of the local bodies.

Gradually, the relationship between the villagers and the local landlords started to become strained. The landlords became willing partisans of the conquering Mughal power and were given a completely free hand "to administer their estates in their own fashion with a monopoly of police and judicial functions." Individual villages varied in the degree of tension experienced, and resistance could be offered only by way of rebellion and not through participation in local bodies. Although sporadic incidents of rebellion are mentioned in some studies, there are hardly any record of the exact dates and details. The local influentials were becoming more useful to the landlords for controlling the villages, and a new pattern of relationships emerged where the local established leaders aided the landlords in their efforts to tyrannize the village.

INNOVATION UNDER BRITISH COLONIAL RULE

The British commenced trading operations in India during the Mughal period, and ultimately established themselves as the rulers. When the British came to India, hereditary noblemen ruled the area consisting of East Bengal as semi-independent chiefs paying only a small tribute to the British government. The local rulers were mostly Hindus who had inherited or acquired land and wealth to become powerful. There was no
emigration and agriculture was the only way of earning a livelihood. The peasantry fell victims to the power of the landlords, resulting in rural oppression. The famine of 1770 reduced the population drastically and there was more land than could be cultivated by the peasants. The agricultural population at the time consisted of two groups. The resident cultivators continued on the same estate either due to attachment to their ancient homes or by reason of indebtedness to their landlord. The non-resident or vagrant cultivators moved into new areas in search of cheaper land. The need for more cultivators and the attempts to win them over resulted in violent feuds among the landed proprietors and the non-resident group took advantage of the confusion to acquire these estates. The agricultural classes were compelled to relinquish their land, and a large section of the land remained untilled. Thus the famine ruined many of the old aristocracy in Lower Bengal. In 1787, the British government undertook direct administration of Lower Bengal, following the breakdown of law and order in the area. By the end of 1788, they were successful in bringing administration back to full working order.¹⁸

In the early days of colonial rule, the term local government was used to denote administrative bodies, boards, and committees appointed or set up by the government. They were awarded funds by the government to be spent on the poor, and on roads, slum clearances, and other works. They exercised powers which were delegated to them by the government and acted as agents of the government.¹⁹ In Bengal, lack of communication
facilities and inaccessibility of the central government compelled the villagers to organize themselves into administrative units. Tradition and local customs contributed to the formulation of laws and village bodies consisting of the elderly and respected villagers looked after their implementation.

Meanwhile, the demands for growth of local government institutions in the urban areas, too, received a very mild response from the British government. It was not until the takeover of Indian administration by the British Crown from the British East India Company that the development of local government institutions could be said to have begun on the Indian subcontinent. A municipal body was set up for Calcutta in the Bengal Presidency in 1726. In 1847, the principle of election was introduced, and it provided for the election of four out of seven 'commissioners for the improvement of the city'. The municipal government started levying taxes in the urban area.

With the advent of British rule and the expansion of government activities, revenue settlement seemed to be the most important task of the government in the rural areas. For such purposes, the British found it convenient to collect revenues through a group of landlords. Lord Cornwallis, the then Governor General of India, was in favour of creating a class of permanent landlords. He introduced the Permanent Settlement Act in 1793, under which the annual settlement of lands was replaced by permanent settlement. The zamindars (land holders) made a
transition from being tax-collectors to the position of landlords. They were entrusted with the collection of revenue and the maintenance of law and order in the villages. The tasks were carried out with total disregard to the needs and abilities of the villagers to pay taxes.

The relationship between the Hindus and the Muslims in East Bengal became that of the ruler and the ruled since most of the landlords were Hindus. While the rich Hindus were entrenched in dominating positions, the general peasantry was gradually being reduced to landless labourers. The impact of colonialism started to create antagonism among the two major religious groups. The landlords tried to secure for themselves a bigger share of the return from the land, and this added to the misery of the villagers. Gradually, village society throughout Bengal "was subordinated permanently to landlord rule." The government found in the landlords the cheapest and safest agency for the security of revenue and its collection with minimum social disturbance.

As demands for responsible government started to be voiced, the first step in streamlining local administration was taken with the publication of Lord Mayo's resolution in 1870. Lord Mayo, the Viceroy, recognized the ability of Indians to administer local affairs. He called for the decentralization of administration, and for associating Indians in the administrative process. Mayo wanted to extend the authority of local government institutions in respect to public expenditure in some of the civil departments. It was also intended to
increase local interest and supervision. The next Viceroy, Lord Ripon considered local government as an "instrument of political and popular education", and advocated devolution of function to the local bodies. His famous Resolution called for the setting up of rural boards with a two-thirds majority of non-officials, who were to be elected. "The chairmen of all local boards should accordingly be non-officials whenever possible." The government was actually responding to the sentiments of the educated urban residents and authority began to be decentralized from the provincial headquarters to the districts.

The Bengal Village Chowkidari Act, 1870, divided the rural areas into unions, each covering approximately ten to twelve square miles. The District Magistrate was empowered to form a five-member panchayat for each union. The panchayat appointed a chowkidar or village policeman and collected money from the local residents to pay for his services. But panchayats could not undertake any development work. This arrangement of appointing panchayats was not beneficial for each village in the union since the panchayats were appointed by the District Magistrate according to his own choice. Many villages went unrepresented in the panchayats. In this way, the colonial administrators ensured the inclusion of people of their choice in the local bodies.

The Bengal District Administration Committee, 1913-1914 reported that chowkidari panchayats were established everywhere in the province. But they were different from panchayats in other areas of India, "for in Bengal the Permanent Settlement
and the predominating local influence of the landlords, as well as other contributory causes, such as the spread of education, improved facilities of communication, and the ever-increasing tendency to centralization of control, have combined to destroy all traces of any village system which may have existed in pre-British days." The Report also pointed out that the unit of administration was not the village, but a number of villages grouped into unions, "though not united by bonds or communal interest." They had failed to become useful parts of the district administration because the panchayats had been entrusted only with the task of assessing and collecting chowkidari tax and payment of the chowkidar's salaries, and could not undertake developmental programmes in the village.

In 1885, the Local Self-Government Act was legislated to provide for a three tier local organization consisting of the District Board, the Local Board and the Union Committee. The Union Committee at the lowest level, operating separately from the union panchayats, covered a few villages, and its members were elected by the villagers. The Union Committee supervised the construction of roads, and sanitation and primary education facilities. It could "raise funds from the villagers owning or occupying houses or properties" to finance these programmes. The chowkidari panchayats too, raised funds for maintaining law and order in the union. The panchayats were quickly losing popularity due to the unpleasant nature of their duties in collecting funds and inefficient and corrupt practices by the members who were not elected by the villagers.
The shortcomings of the chowkidari panchayats became evident to the government and an Act was passed in 1892 to amend the Bengal Village Chowkidari Act of 1870. The procedure for the appointment of the chowkidars was revised. The panchayats could recommend candidates, but the District Magistrate was the actual appointing authority. The control over the chowkidars was transferred to the provincial regular police. Thus, the Act of 1892 was a reverse step towards centralization in local government authority. Now the attempt to introduce local self-government in Bengal started from the district, and "the village was made completely dependent and subservient to the district authorities." Subrata Mukherjee attributed the village's subservience to, among other causes, the interests of the rulers in combination with the political pressure put by more vocal and conscious urban residents and also to the apathy of the rural people.

The effects of colonial rule were obvious in the conditions of the rural society in East Bengal. By the turn of the century, the poorer villagers had become absolutely helpless, and the agents of the landlord, officials from government service and the local moneylenders wielded real power. Tinker pointed out that an attempt was made by the Bengal government to make village committees more effective, but the plan was rejected by the British Secretary of State for India. The formation of the Indian National Congress and the growth of Indian nationalism had made the British apprehensive of total decentralization.
Another development that was of particular significance to East Bengal was the transformation of the Muslim community into a cohesive political force under the organization of the Muslim League (ML). The Muslims had previously been left in the background due to lack of education and an organization to articulate their interests. In 1905, demands were successfully pressed for the partition of the province of Bengal into East and West. East Bengal, being a Muslim majority area, was perceived to be slipping out of control of the Hindu higher castes who dominated the local scene. The Hindus started agitating against the partition, and succeeded in getting it annulled in 1911. The ML was formed in 1906, and communal violence broke out for the first time between the two communities in the following year. The tension survived, and the Muslims continued to demand more participation in public affairs. The colonial government followed a policy of divide and rule, and partitioned Bengal to create cleavage between the Hindus and the Muslims. John McLane has accused the British of providing "issues and institutions which ensured the communalization of politics."³¹

The Decentralization Commission was constituted in 1907 to enquire into the relationship between the central and the provincial governments and the authorities subordinate to them. The Commission made a number of recommendations which included an elected panchayat and the merger of the panchayat and the Union Committees. But the colonial government was not yet ready to experiment with elected panchayats with delegated authority.
The suggestions were not implemented, and reforms were postponed for a further ten years.\(^{32}\)

A committee appointed by the Bengal government in 1912 observed that the local bodies in the province failed to perform the tasks assigned to them. The Bengal District Administration Committee found no justification for the existence of the Local Boards. According to the Committee, the Boards' members had neither knowledge of, nor any interest in village affairs. The committee pointed out the peculiarity of East Bengal districts as the most difficult to administer due to extremely poor communication facilities, the distance between government officials and the local population, and the absence of an organized village government system.\(^{33}\) The recommendations of the committee were similar to those of the Decentralization Commission, and were similarly ignored. The colonial rulers were still not willing to delegate power to the local bodies, although they repeatedly expressed their intention to do so.

In 1918 Edwin Montagu, the Secretary of State for India and Lord Chelmsford, the Viceroy, advocated the growth of self-governing institutions in India. The number of elected members was to be increased to make them the majority in the local bodies. The Montagu-Chelmsford Report suggested that the panchayats should be endowed with civil and criminal jurisdiction in petty cases, some administrative powers in the field of sanitation and education, and permissive powers of imposing local rates.\(^{34}\)

The Montagu-Chelmsford Report ushered the Beng&al Village
Self-Government Act of 1919. The panchayats and Union Committees were merged and named the Union Boards. The Union Board covered an area of approximately ten square miles with a population of about 8,000.\(^{35}\) Only a third of the members of the Union Board were nominated, thus ensuring the control of the government. The Indian Statutory Commission recommended the abolition of the practice of nominating members to the local bodies.\(^{36}\) The Bengal Administrative Enquiry Committee (Rowlands Report) made a similar suggestion, and the practice of nomination was terminated in 1946. Meanwhile, East Bengal experienced some changes in the composition of the local bodies as "the Muslims' new electoral organization and alliances with the Hindu peasantry had resulted in the Hindu bhadralok's loss of control of many local boards at the 1927 and 1931 elections."\(^{37}\) This reveals a new dimension in local and communal politics. The poorer section of the Hindus and the Muslims were together resisting the domination of the upper caste Hindus.

Throughout the periods during which these developments took place, there were stipulations on the eligibility of voters. The franchise was granted to villagers paying one rupee annually as a local cess, and to those who passed a literacy test.\(^{38}\) The number of members of Union Boards varied from six to nine in the different villages of the province. The subordination of Union Boards to the District Boards and the appointment of civil service officials to oversee the operation of village bodies ensured government control over these bodies. The operation of the panchayats was impeded "where the community was rent by
faction or family feuds, or when it was overshadowed by some local bully ....". In areas where the villagers had to work extremely hard for a living, "one would usually find a dull indifference to the advantages of new forms of communal combination." Tinker pointed out that the "virus of faction" was less active in the Union Boards than in municipal affairs. Compared to other provinces, Bengal appeared to be more successful in setting up and running local government. Yet the villages continued to controlled and directed by traditional influentials in collaboration with the agents of the government. Participation in local affairs remained extremely limited. Ramkrishna Mukherjee's survey of some villages in 1941 attests to the miserable condition of the villagers. He classified the people of rural Bengal into nine occupational groups: landholders, supervisory farmers, cultivators, sharecroppers, agricultural labourers, artisans, traders, service-holders, and others. Most of these groups lived in poverty; there were large differences of income, and about nine-tenths of the population surveyed were concentrated among the low income groups. 

An alternate way in which the British government sought to improve life in the villages was to emphasize rural development. The concept of rural development originated in Bengal with the establishment of a Department of Agriculture in 1880, following the famine of 1878. The initial purpose was to set up an office to be used for the distribution of relief materials in the affected areas. The department expanded gradually, and by 1911 there was an agriculture college, research stations, and
training centres for officers and district farms. The Department of Agriculture aimed to disseminate results of research among cultivators and to organize famine relief. Meanwhile, village cooperatives were organized in 1904 to supply credit required for agricultural development. But little progress was made and by 1940, the Department was "spending (the) bulk of its fund for maintaining the staff.""}

**REFORMS UNDER PAKISTANI RULE**

The most visible legacy of colonialism in India was its partition in 1947. The birth of Pakistan presented the challenge of organizing and building up the new state. Initially, there was no attempt to reorganize local government. The colonial system of local government continued in East Bengal. The euphoria of independence prevailed for some time and there were no demands from the people for reforming the local government system. But the void created by the departure of Hindu landlords was felt in the rural areas, because alternate Muslim local leadership had not developed over the years. Some opportunists were quick to take advantage of the situation and tried to assume leadership. Their success aroused jealousy among other aspirants. Local leaders thus started competing against one another.

In pursuit of rural development, the Village Agricultural and Industrial Development (V-AID) programme was introduced in
1954 with the objective of fostering effective citizen participation in development activities. V-AID was expected to cover agriculture, primary education, adult education, health and sanitation, cooperatives, cottage industries, irrigation and reclamation of land, secondary road construction, youth and women's programmes and social and recreational activities.

"The basic assumption was that by helping villagers acquire greater confidence in themselves and their government servants, precision in using scientific methods, competence in using co-operative methods of discussion and action and skill in resolving social conflict, their development efforts would be enhanced and existing conditions of apathy, overdependence on authority, fear of change and factionalism could be overcome."  

Azer Ali used one case in Rajbari, Faridpur to demonstrate that the V-AID programme resulted in "enthusiasm among villagers to improve their living conditions." He also stated that "shortage of funds, lack of training facilities and the instability of provincial and central governments were the main causes for the slow progress." The V-AID programme could only prepare the ground for later growth in local developmental organization before it was terminated in 1962.

In May 1959, the Pakistan Academy for Village Development started training officers of V-AID and the government departments dealing with rural development. The institution was renamed Pakistan Academy for Rural Development in 1962. The Academy contributed to the development of a model thana administration in Comilla district through the Thana Training and Development Centre, and a two-tier cooperative known as Comilla Cooperative. Akhtar Hameed Khan, a former civil servant
and college professor, was the architect of the Comilla model which was based on certain assumptions. The first was that since the villagers themselves had the best understanding of the problems of rural life, rural development should be approached from their point of view. Second, villagers are capable of bringing about changes in their conditions, and should be provided with the opportunity to initiate the process of change through individual and cooperative efforts. The village should be recognized as the starting point for the process of modernization. According to the Comilla model enthusiasts, local leaders were more effective agents of change than government officials and could be used to introduce innovative measures to solve local problems.

The Comilla model has been criticized because it did not produce solutions to many local problems. In Comilla, there were no radical changes in the exercise of governmental authority and no land tenure change in the rural areas. Most of the better-off farmers took advantage, but the landless gained little in direct benefit. The Comilla model, it seems, could be successful only in particular limited projects. It did not provide a guaranteed formula for significant change in Comilla's rural areas. The prospect of its replication in other areas of the country was, therefore, limited. Rural institutions could definitely be improved by helping and educating their members and clients. But this was not sufficient to improve the conditions prevailing in the rural areas.

Politically, East Bengal underwent numerous changes after
1947. Opposition to the ruling party, the ML, brought many factions together to form the Awami Muslim League. Later, the word "Muslim" was deleted from the name, and the Awami League (AL) went on to become the principal spokesman for the Bengalis' needs and demands. The party's leadership included Maulana Abdul Hamid Khan Bhashani, a peasant leader also considered as a religious leader. Gradually, other leaders gained popularity in East Bengal. The Krishak Sramik Party (KSP) led by A.K.M. Fazlul Huq had a massive following in the rural areas. The AL and the KSP, along with a number of smaller parties, formed an alliance and routed the ML in the provincial elections held in 1954. The defeat of the ruling ML and the articulation of demands for regional autonomy laid the base for the AL in the remote areas of East Bengal, especially since the KSP was fading after Fazlul Huq joined government service. While the traditional influentials continued their allegiance to the ML, a new group of big farmers who had prospered after the partition of 1947 found the AL a vehicle with which to challenge the domination of the ML supporters. With the passage of time, the policies of the national government of Pakistan contributed to a stronger and broader base for the AL.

In 1956, the first constitution of Pakistan changed the name of the province from East Bengal to East Pakistan. In the same year, the government undertook a study of the problems of local government in the province. Although the Union Boards were democratized by adopting universal adult franchise, local bodies continued to perform very poorly. The reasons were the
inclusion of inefficient people, often through patronage, with little scope to perform, and too much control exercised by the government." Independence and the transformation from a colony to a province of an independent state had no effect on the performance of local bodies. They were still controlled by the wealthy villagers who furthered their own interests with the help of government officials.

Martial Law was imposed on Pakistan for the first time in October, 1958 following a constitutional breakdown. Within a year, the military government headed by General Ayub Khan had drawn up a scheme for reorganizing the system of local government in Pakistan. A system of local government under the nomenclature of Basic Democracy was established in 1959 which ostensibly encouraged the growth of local democracy. Basic Democracy consisted of four tiers: the Union Council, the Thana Council, the District Council, and the Divisional Council.

The Union Council was the unit closest to the villages. It covered a number of villages, and was run by a body of approximately ten members. Initially, one-third of the members were nominated by the government. From 1962, the procedure was changed and all the members were elected for five years by the residents of the union. The Union Council elected its Chairman, who was the chief executive of the body.

The Union Councils were entrusted with a long list of functions including civic, police and security, revenue and general administrative functions as well as tasks related to national reconstruction, agricultural development, judicial and
However, for a number of reasons, most of these functions could not be performed. Control was exercised over the villages and the Union Councils by the Thana Councils. The government controlled and conducted the election of the Union Council members and the Chairman. In case the Union Council failed to elect its Chairman, the controlling authority which was vested with the government officials, enabled them to appoint a Chairman. The Union Council could be suspended or superceded by the government which also controlled policy decisions and the conduct of business, directly or indirectly.

The Thana level officers and the Chairmen of Union Councils constituted a Thana Council in order to coordinate the efforts of government officers and people's representatives. The dominance of the government officials in these bodies, and the deference to their superior positions by the local leaders resulted in effective control by the officials. Concessions were sometimes made to keep the Chairmen satisfied with this arrangement. In any case, the result was little benefit for ordinary villagers.

Basic Democracy was introduced toward the fag end of the decentralization wave of the 1950s, and operated throughout the 1960s, when control over local operations by the central government in Pakistan was very tight. Rahman's examination of the Basic Democracy system revealed that eighty-five per cent of all issues on local council agendas were put there by communications from the central government. "The overbearing
intervention of officials in local government affairs" is one of the principal criticisms of Basic Democracy raised by Huque.\textsuperscript{48} Huque also mentioned, as further criticism of Basic Democracy, the usurping of the people's right of franchise by making the Basic Democrats an electoral college to elect the National Assembly and the President, and the lack of proper audit of local council funds which may have been used for "political bribery."\textsuperscript{49} A survey showed that while in 1961 more than three-quarters of the Union Council Chairmen who were interviewed for a study by M.R. Khan earned about Rs. 1000 per annum, by 1964, the income of 61.1 per cent of the same group shot up to over Rs. 4000 per annum.\textsuperscript{50} Thus a new opportunity was provided for the supporters of the Ayub regime in the rural areas. It becomes clear that the system was established with the intention of creating a group of supporters who would help General Ayub Khan stay in power. This explanation is substantiated by a study which found that the Ayub regime was bribing the Basic Democrats under the guise of grants to the councils.\textsuperscript{51} But after the presidential elections of 1965, it became clear that the Basic Democrats were divided in their loyalty since the presidential candidate put up by the Combined Opposition Parties polled about forty-five per cent of the votes in East Pakistan.\textsuperscript{52}

A number of rural development programmes were launched during the Ayub regime. Since they continued after the break-up of the country, they will be reviewed in the next chapter dealing with Bangladesh. Although the government continued to
shower praise on Basic Democracy which, it said, was achieving the goals of economic development, social equality and political democracy, it could not be considered democratic because it did not "represent control by the people over government power except in an extremely limited manner." Gradually, the political role of the Basic Democrats assumed more importance than their administrative and local government functions. Since the Union Councils were the lowest level of local institutions, the villages continued to be neglected. Funds for local projects rarely trickled down to the villages. Decisions were made at the Union level, and programmes that benefitted the local influentials were undertaken. The system favoured big farmers, and resulted in a rise in the participation of new moneyed classes such as businessmen and contractors. The majority of village residents -- small farmers and landless labourers -- were still excluded from decision-making in local affairs.

Basic Democracy had corrupted the entire local government machinery, particularly the rural local bodies. It failed like other reform attempts mainly because the system was designed to serve the interests of a certain group that would support the regime. These criticisms began to be voiced by provincial politicians when a nationwide movement against the Ayub regime was launched. In March 1969, General Ayub Khan stepped down and the military took power under General Yahya Khan. The next couple of years witnessed the first general elections in the history of Pakistan, the military crackdown in East Pakistan,
the secession of East Pakistan from the federation, and the birth of Bangladesh. Local government institutions operated informally in the villages, and there were no attempts to reform them during this period of national crisis.

1971 marked the end of colonial rule in Bangladesh. Long periods of foreign domination and the preceding years of unstable independence of the country have affected the political as well as local government systems. At times, the foreign rulers expressed their desire to reform local institutions, but stopped short of actual decentralization. It seems that the reforms were not intended to allow the development of local government institutions at the lowest level. The foreign rulers could not completely trust the natives to permit full autonomy to the local bodies. In all the plans announced throughout the colonial rule, provisions were made for retaining control of local government by government officials. Local government bodies could never be made fully representative. The low level of development and the limited franchise restricted popular participation. Although the franchise was extended in the later years, the colonial legacy of maintaining a strong bureaucracy continued in Pakistan. The Pakistani government, too, used the public officials as supervisors over the activities of local government institutions. The nature of changes brought about by the Pakistanis differed little from those made by the British. In the colonial tradition, the government kept its distance from the people and it was not possible for the two to work together. Thus, unwillingness of the centre to delegate authority to the
lower levels negated the possibility of affecting changes in the system of local government.

The colonial legacy was not the only factor that led to the failure of local government reforms in Bangladesh. The absence of tangible rewards to be won by participating in local affairs often resulted in apathy and a resignation to fate by the villagers. Sometimes, family feuds and social rivalry were accorded more importance than local public affairs. Since the creation of Pakistan, the initiation of major developmental projects suddenly increased the importance of local bodies. Local leaders started to compete for the control of these institutions. Factionalism became prominent, and in many cases, obstructed the growth of local government. Uneven political mobilization affected all these factors, and the villages were not adequately prepared to respond to reforms. Some of the post-colonial problems are discussed in the next chapter, in which I will look at the attempts of the first independent Bangladesh government to design a village-based local government system.
NOTES


9 This view of Sri Aurobindo was quoted in M. Nurul Haq, Gram Sarkar in Historical Perspective (Bogra: Rural Development Academy, 1980), p. 1.

10 Ibid., p. 1.


16 Tinker, op. cit., p. 19.

18 For details on the conditions the British found in Bengal, see Hunter, op. cit., pp. 13-19.


21 Ibid., p. 32.


24 Tinker, op. cit., p. 45.


27 Ibid., pp. 13-14.


29 Ibid., p. 22.

30 Tinker, op. cit., p. 55.


32 Tinker, op. cit., p. 87.


35 Tinker, op. cit., p. 118.


38 Tinker, op. cit., p. 197.

39 Ibid., pp. 205-6.


42 Ibid., p. 18.

43 Ibid., pp. 20-22.


46 See Ahmed, op. cit., pp. 58-64.


49 Ibid.


52 The distribution of the vote in East Pakistan districts in 1965 presidential election has been obtained from Rounaq Jahan, *Pakistan: Failure in National Integration* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972).


III. LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH: THE GENESIS OF GRAM SARKAR

Governments in newly independent states face several problems. The organization of new states following independence is complicated by attempts to break away from the legacies of foreign domination. While political leaders advocate a complete break from the past, the scarcity of resources and qualified personnel, and the preoccupation of the rulers with more pressing problems result in neglect of local government. The national political leaders do not have ready alternatives to the previous systems, and have little choice but to allow the continuation of existing local government practice. There are small modifications and changes of titles, but the system is more or less undisturbed. The politicians compete over the spoils of independence, and only the prospects of elections shift their attention to local government for brief periods. Confusion and disruption in government obstruct the possibilities of developing local government. In their efforts to continue in power, the rulers do not want to reorganize local government without ensuring that the changes will favour them. In order to introduce major changes, the traditionally powerful groups in the localities must be persuaded to work with the government. In most cases, the government does not have concrete plans of its own, and major changes become all the more difficult. Hastily assembled programmes are put forward for implementation, without considering the prospects of success.

The trend of maintaining control at the centre that persisted throughout the early days of Bangladesh did not change
with the departure of the colonial rulers. The central government continued to pursue a policy of dominating local affairs with the help of its officials and supporters who were in control of local bodies. The reluctance of the government as well as the rural powerholders to decentralize power to the lowest levels becomes clear in a review of the changes that took place in the system of local government in Bangladesh since independence.


Bangladesh was liberated from Pakistani rule in December, 1971. The liberation war had brought the government virtually to a standstill, and local government institutions, too, were inoperative. Nevertheless, in many areas, local affairs continued to be managed informally by existing local leaders. During the liberation movement, the nationalist leaders had put into discredit all the institutions designed by the Pakistanis as instruments of exploitation. The nation expected a major overhaul of the system, including local government institutions.

After achieving independence in 1971, Bangladesh was governed for a few years by the Awami League (AL), the dominant political party. The party had a very strong base before independence, and subsequently enjoyed unrivalled popularity. In its first year of rule, the AL faced the task of restoring order in the country and setting up administrative machinery
following the departure of the Pakistanis. As a result, little attention was paid to local government reform, and the pre-independence system was allowed to continue.

The AL which formed the first government of Bangladesh had several limitations. Most of the Ministers had no previous experience of running government departments. They had to depend entirely on the bureaucracy in the initial stages of reorganization after the liberation war. Moreover, the AL had its support base among the rural middle farmers and did not want to antagonize this group by ushering in major changes in rural local government that might favour poor villagers at the expense of the party's supporters. But it was imperative that something be done about local government, because the previous Basic Democracy system stood suspended. Moreover, the government had to demonstrate that it was working to build a new system in local government. Under these circumstances, it was not surprising that the government had minimal reform in mind and only preferred cosmetic changes. On the official level, the first reorganization of local government took place in early 1972.

The Bangladesh Local Councils and Municipal Committees (Dissolution and Administration) (Amendment) Order, 1972 was proclaimed to dissolve local government councils throughout the country. The Chairmen, Vice-Chairmen, members and administrators of such bodies ceased to hold office. The Union Councils were renamed Union Panchayats and their functions were to be performed by a committee appointed by the Sub-Divisional
Officer (S.D.O.). Gradually, it appeared that the powers exercised by elected representatives in the local councils up to this point were being transferred to government officials. This caused considerable resentment among politicians. Subsequently, the government issued a clarification stating that this was to be a temporary measure and promising that local councils would be constituted with representatives elected on the basis of adult franchise as early as possible.¹ For the Union Panchayats in the rural areas, meanwhile, the S.D.O. would appoint the local Union Agricultural Assistant or a Tahsildar as the administrator. Actually, very little change resulted from this order. Later in the year, the first constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh was promulgated and it provided for the local bodies to be composed of persons who were elected in accordance with law.² In June 1973, the Parliament passed a law changing the name of Union Panchayats to Union Parishads.³

Each union was divided into three wards and each ward elected three members. In addition, a Chairman and a Vice-Chairman were also elected by the residents of the union. In reality, very little was changed except the titles of the local government bodies, and conditions in the villages deteriorated along with the rest of the country. Decisions in local councils were often influenced by personal and political considerations and there were no effective opposition parties to provide constructive criticism. The leaders of the councils had links with the ruling political party and the villagers were not in a position to challenge their decisions. The people involved in
local institutions were not interested in solving local problems and did not want to spend time dealing with local issues. They were busy with the organization of relief committees which were being set up to help the villagers affected by the liberation war. They had more tasks assigned to them than they could handle, and were completely dependent on the central government for funds to run the local organizations.

In an effort to mobilize support for the AL in the rural areas, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the Prime Minister of Bangladesh announced in 1973:

Elections are to be held soon to the union councils throughout the country. This will result in closer liaison between the administration and the people and popular representatives will be enabled to run the administration at the village level."

But the country faced severe economic problems and suffered mismanagement by the ruling party. The popularity of the AL decreased rapidly. The impact of bad administration was felt more in the rural areas. Most of the relief materials procured under foreign aid was used by the AL to appease the urban residents who were capable of organizing opposition movements. The already impoverished countryside was deprived of relief assistance, and support for the ruling political party in those areas declined. The government passed a couple of amendments to the constitution allowing for special trials and putting restrictions on fundamental rights and jurisdiction of courts. Mujib realised that official positions were being misused by his partymen and appealed to the AL members "to rid the organization of such elements."
An emergency was proclaimed by the President of Bangladesh on the advice of the Prime Minister following the murder of a member of the Jatiya Sangsad and a Union Parishad member in December, 1974. The government was empowered to censor the press, ban strikes and lockouts, stop political parties from functioning, and suspend fundamental rights. On January 25, 1975, the constitution was amended to provide for a presidential form of government and Sheikh Mujibur Rahman assumed the office of the President. "The Amendment virtually destroyed all powers of the legislature to control the Executive." 6

A single-party system was to be introduced with the AL as the cornerstone. In June 1975, the Bangladesh Krishak Sramik Awami League (BAKSAL) was constituted. Sheikh Mujib appealed to all the political parties to join the new party. The pro-Moscow National Awami Party (NAP-M) joined immediately along with some other groups of minor significance. But the BAKSAL was totally controlled by Sheikh Mujib and the AL. Although this was a severe blow to the establishment of a democratic system, there was little public protest against this move by Mujib.

More efforts to ensure control by the government followed. The government announced a scheme of reorganizing the district administration. Bangladesh was to be divided into fifty administrative districts headed by District Governors who would be appointed by the single party, BAKSAL. This move was expected to bring the ruling party closer to the local people, and the existing district structures would be further divided to facilitate more efficient administration as well as to
accommodate more people in the scheme as Governors. Later, the number of districts in the reorganization plan was revised. On July 16, 1975, Sheikh Mujib announced the names of sixty-one Governor-designates who were to take over district administration from September 1, 1975. The scheme did not materialize, however, as the government headed by Sheikh Mujib was removed from power by a military coup on August 15, 1975.

Over the first four years following independence, then, virtually no attempt was made to revive or reconstruct local government in Bangladesh. The AL which was, prior to independence, the party of the deprived East Pakistani bourgeoisie demanding an equal share of the "capitalist pie", could hardly meet the political expectations of a nation comprised mostly of landless labourers and small farmers living in the rural areas. Political activities were concentrated in the capital and participation was monopolized by urban residents who had easy access to the centre of power.

During the liberation war, the AL attracted Bengalis from all classes and groups. The party gained unprecedented support even in the rural areas. The nature of its leadership was influenced by this support base, and gradually the AL transformed from a provincial bourgeoisie party to a broad-based popular nationalist party. After the parliamentary elections of 1973, the political elite which ruled the country represented "in general a rural middle class interest", and came from the rural areas with careers in the district and mofussil towns. This group had acquired property in the urban areas, and used
the small towns only as their political bases. As a result, they neglected the rural areas and served the interest of the urban areas. The emergence of Dhaka as the centre of national political and commercial activities attracted people to the capital. The politicians, too, preferred to serve urban interests in their bid to attain prominence in the national political scene. The interests of the rural poor suffered, in spite of the fact that they constituted the biggest section of the population.

RURAL DEVELOPMENT: STRATEGIES AND RESULTS

Mujib's government could not reform local institutions or extend them to the lowest levels, but found an alternate way of seeking the support of the rural electorate in emphasizing rural development. Some progress had already been made during the British and Pakistani periods, and after 1971 the government sought to continue these programmes.

Khan and Latif have reviewed the principal programmes concerned with rural development in Bangladesh. These include the Rural Works Programme (RWP), the Accelerated Rice Production Programme (ARPP), the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), and the Water Development Programme. Most of these programmes were planned and initiated before independence, and they were considered extremely useful after the birth of Bangladesh.
The RWP aimed to provide landless labourers an opportunity to earn their livelihood in the dry season. The programme was to help develop infrastructures — roads, tube wells, credit facilities — in the rural areas through local government institutions. The ARPP was intended to achieve self-sufficiency in rice over a period of five years by promoting water supply, introducing new varieties of rice, and providing government subsidies on other inputs. The IRDP was aimed, among other things, at spreading a two-tier cooperative system and the organization of the Thana Training Development Centres. The Water Development Programme was entrusted to the Water Development Board (WDB) and included the planning and distribution of water resources and designing and implementing flood control measures.

The various programmes were only minimally successful, and resulted in a number of unintended consequences. The programmes had different priority objectives and each was "competing for limited managerial skills and financial resources from the national exchequer, foreign assistance sources and the community effort." Although the RWP provided the most benefit to landless labourers, it was criticized for its "emphasis on roads as opposed to irrigation." Also, the absence of a time limit for reaching development targets resulted in a steady drain on the exchequer. During the Pakistan period, the benefits went mostly to the wealthy farmers, as against the vast majority of landless labourers. No concrete step has been taken in Bangladesh to reverse this trend.
The ARPP has been criticized for widening the inequality between landowning and landless farmers, thus polarizing the two. According to the critics, the attempt at self-sufficiency would lead to a "greater social and political problem." Similar criticisms were levelled against the IRDP. This organization was torn between the goals of "slow painstaking disciplined building of a cooperative society of the Comilla model" and the "rapid development, registration and subsidizing" for the loose cooperatives of the ARPP. A joint review by the Government of Bangladesh and the International Development Authority in 1981 revealed that the performance of the IRDP had not been noteworthy and that the programme had lost focus in the course of its rapid expansion. The IRDP has been dissolved and replaced by the Bangladesh Rural Development Board in 1982. The Water Development Programme has so far demonstrated "little interest and no expertise in who used the water it develops." All attempts at rural development through various organizations suffered from a lack of coordination and conflicting sets of priorities.

Such sporadic and inconsistent efforts at rural development resulted in occasional increases in productivity, some off-season employment opportunities for the rural poor, and training and dissemination of research findings for the villagers and personnel involved in rural development programmes. Improvements were noticed in some areas, and benefits were mostly reaped by a small percentage of wealthy villagers. The stated objective of providing a better life to the villagers,
especially the overwhelming majority of rural poor, was not achieved. In fact, the gap between the wealthy and the rural poor continued to widen.

The ineffectiveness of government sponsored rural development efforts became obvious. These programmes were generally subsidized through government funds which benefitted the rural groups with the best access to government offices. The available funds were used by local influential to recruit villagers to their side, and the main purpose of the rival factions tended to be gaining control of those resources. The objectives of the programmes were neglected and the villagers lost faith in these projects.

THE SWANIRVAR MOVEMENT

A Swanirvar Bangladesh Andolon (movement for a self-reliant Bangladesh) was launched as an autonomous organization with the principal objectives of increasing agricultural production and reducing population growth. The idea was conceived and developed by Mahbub Alam Chashi, a senior officer of the former Pakistan Foreign Service. He was a Bangladeshi from Chittagong district, and as a high level officer, had close links with the government. In 1967, when a flood destroyed the crops in Gumai Bil under Rangunia Thana in the district of Chittagong, Chashi was able to persuade the villagers to recrop the area through self help instead of depending totally on relief materials
provided by the government. Through local participation, it was possible to recrop the area without massive relief measures. This success was repeated in a similar project in Ramgati in Noakhali district. After a tornado devastated the village in November 1970, the relief material and funds received from the government were used as the capital to attain self-sufficiency through cooperatives.  

Starting with isolated, locally organized programmes of self-help which did not generate awareness on a large scale, Swanirvar activities again came to the fore after the independence of Bangladesh. District authorities decided to use the strategy to rehabilitate people affected by the famine that devastated the country in 1974. The idea was not entirely new in a country frequently facing floods and famines. Previously, there had been efforts by government officials to boost agricultural production with help from local people to meet increasing demands, especially following natural disasters. In 1974-75, district Swanirvar programmes were drawn up with emphasis on increased food production. The success of such programmes varied among districts. District officials were actively involved in the Swanirvar efforts in some cases, while in others, they helped to organize the programmes and left them to be developed through popular initiative. The efforts were combined into a national programme and the first National Swanirvar Conference took place in 1975.

Meanwhile, the district development programmes, in some cases, focussed on other aspects of life in the rural society of
Bangladesh. For example, in the districts of Sylhet and Dhaka, "stress was laid on family planning activity as part of the District programme, although the slogan for self-sufficiency in food remained a constant factor."

The district administration selected one village in each district for development into a Swanirvar village. The process of development included the compilation of a manual for the survey of the resources available in the villages, the organization of different interest groups, training the villagers in carrying out the survey, and training village workers in workshops to transmit ideas from one area to another. Unfortunately, the programmes entailed huge expenses that were never justified, and a lack of trust between government officials and the villagers made progress extremely difficult.

The Swanirvar movement, however, had caught the attention of the government which was now convinced that the programme contributed to national self-reliance. The initiator of the Swanirvar movement, Mahbub Alam Chashi, was appointed Special Secretary, Agriculture (Swanirvar), and this was the first sign of government approval. The constitution of a Central Swanirvar Committee followed. After the change of government in 1975, Chashi was appointed Principal Secretary to President Khandakar Mushtaq Ahmed. It became evident that Chashi and his Swanirvar movement would enjoy the full support of the new government. The first national Swanirvar Conference was followed up with workshops in each district designed to make the villagers aware of the ideals and strategies of the movement. In the Second
National Swanirvar Conference in 1976, it was resolved to continue the movement as a non-political effort, and to develop a self-reliant village in each thana.\textsuperscript{22}

It can be said that the Swanirvar movement laid the groundwork for developing village-based organizations in independent Bangladesh. The movement emphasized the framing of village development plans and implementing them through local initiative after a survey of the available resources. These tasks had to be assigned and supervised by a coordinating body of villagers. Swanirvar village committees were formed for this purpose with representatives from different classes and professional groups. The committees could be selected by consensus or by election at an assembly of the adult residents or the heads of families in the village.\textsuperscript{23} Adequate representation of all the resident groups was to be ensured. For this purpose, the organizers of Swanirvar Bangladesh had categorized the village population into farmers, landless agricultural labourers, women, youth, and pursuers of other professions.\textsuperscript{24} The initial strategy was to select one village in each thana with the help of the Circle Officer (Development), to hold Swanirvar workshops in some of these villages with the objective of bringing the government officials at the union, thana and higher levels to work with the villagers and to continuously train Swanirvar workers in the villages for follow-up programmes through workshops in those villages which achieved better performance records.\textsuperscript{25} Shaikh Maqsood Ali, however, pointed out that:
76

(a) the Swanirvar villages selected by the C.O. Dev. (or other district officers) were usually very near the Thana centres. These villages also had better communication facilities and better record of development in the past;
(b) the Swanirvar camps in many cases reduced themselves to picnic spots for officers (with substantial wastage of money, time and energy of the officers and also of the villagers);
(c) the Swanirvar Committees formed in the village were not really representative in character: the poor and the distressed were mostly nominated candidates of the rich and the powerful.²⁶

Nevertheless, according to Chashi, 354 Swanirvar villages were evaluated in 1976 and classified according to their accomplishments. 37 villages did excellently and were put in the 'A' category, while 96 villages were put in the 'B' category for doing fairly well. 157 villages were placed in the 'C' category for doing some work, and the 'D' category included 74 villages which did not do any work.²⁷ In the most successful villages, the average income increased by about thirty-seven per cent, food production improved, the literacy rate went up, and population growth and crime rate went down.²⁸ The results added to the enthusiasm for expansion, and by 1977, with the encouragement of the government, each union of Bangladesh had a self-reliant village.²⁹ These villages had self-governing local institutions which can be considered to be the forerunners of the Swanirvar Gram Sarkar bodies established by the government in 1980.

The Swanirvar movement kept gaining momentum and more villages were included in the programme. The idea of village government and the name Gram Sarkar was first used around 1977. The Swarnirvar workers of a village called Pashchim Sultanpur in
Chittagong district named their village Swanirvar Committee a Gram Sarkar, and portfolios entrusting agriculture, education, health, family planning, cooperatives, and others were distributed among the members of the Village Sarkar who were called Village Ministers. The titles of Gram Sarkar (village government) and Gram Mantri (village ministers) became popular. The Chairman of the adjacent Rangunia Union adopted the idea for his union by distributing portfolios to the members of the Union Parishad and calling them "Union Ministers". These individual Ministers in their turn formed "Village Sarkars" in their respective villages and thus the link between the village and the union sarkars was established for the first time.\(^\text{30}\)

The apparent success of Swarnirvar villages and the differences between them and the villages not covered by the Swanirvar movement began to be noticed, and gradually the idea was expanded in some unions to form Union Sarkars, with a council composed of all the Gram Sarkar chiefs in the union. After the assumption of the Presidency in 1977, Ziaur Rahman "sought formally to integrate the Union Parishad with Swanirvar by highlighting the role of Union Parishad Members and Chairmen in the process of rural development based on voluntary mobilization of local resources."\(^\text{31}\) In 1977, more Union Sarkars were set up and in those unions, Union Ministers were assigned responsibilities. However, the use of the term "ministers" for village and union council members was not liked by some politicians, and it was decided to call them Gram Sarkar and Union Sarkar members.
The Swanirvar movement had enjoyed the de facto patronage of the government, and the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives issued a number of circulars advising its integration with local government administration. President Zia demonstrated his support by visiting various projects undertaken by the Swanirvar movement and by speaking in its favour. It appears that the Swanirvar movement was being politicized and used by the ruling party.

By 1978, a number of facts about the Swanirvar movement became clear. The sponsors were drawing the attention of the country to the most successful villages where village resources had been surveyed, interest and functional groups had been organized, village disputes had been settled locally, the rate of literacy had gone up, the number of social workers had increased, and planned development of the village had been encouraged. But evaluators of the movement found some major defects:

(a) there were Swanirvar villages that claimed to have surveyed resources, but this was known only to a small group of people.
(b) there were Swanirvar villages where village factionalism and disputes still continued and made the operation of interest group organizations ineffective;
(c) the spread of education had been rather slow in most Swanirvar villages. In many cases the initial momentum got lost after a few months;
(d) the traditional leaders still dominated most interest group organizations and the Swanirvar Committees and as such, these organizations and committees could not function as expected. Sometimes these Swanirvar Committees were infiltrated by village touts and other undesirable elements for their own interests;
(e) often villages opted for the Swanirvar scheme only in the hope that they would eventually get more resources from the government; and
(f) very little could be done in the Swanirvar
villages for the poor and distressed.\textsuperscript{33} There were contradictory observations on the prospects of the Swanirvar movement. While "the intellectual and the educated of the village" thought of the movement as a more or less futile endeavour, the landless, the youth and the women groups considered it to be "good and useful".\textsuperscript{34} It provided a forum for disadvantaged groups to organize and voice their expectations in the village councils.

The government had all along expressed its support toward the movement for self-reliance, and admitted its usefulness in national development. A number of villages were organized under the Swanirvar programme, and some demonstrated progress. Their progress probably made the ruling party apprehensive that a strong and successful local government institution was developing, and that it might be captured and used by other political parties to challenge the BNP. In October 1978, the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives issued a notice cancelling the Gram Sarkars. The organizers of Swanirvar Bangladesh protested that the government could not suspend a movement which was successfully progressing through non-governmental efforts.\textsuperscript{35} The villagers' endeavour to attain self-reliance continued in many villages despite the official cancellation of Gram Sarkars.

At the centre, the government maintained cordial relations with the organizers of Swanirvar Bangladesh. In 1979, Zia agreed to accept the chairmanship of the National Swanirvar Bangladesh Committee.\textsuperscript{36} He visited the Naldanga union in Rangpur
district in July 1979, and stated that the Swanirvar movement had been successful in thousands of villages in Bangladesh. He said that his government was willing to do everything needed to make the movement successful. He expressed the hope that all 68,000 villages of Bangladesh would follow the example of Naldanga union. According to Zia, the government had undertaken a massive plan for making the villages self-reliant.³⁷

Zia was impressed by the progress made at Naldanga and convinced the leaders of the BNP, members of his Cabinet and government officials of the need for having village-based organizations. Some BNP leaders did not like the idea initially, and were reluctant to take over an institution already developed by the Swanirvar movement. But the political benefits that would accrue to the BNP made Zia and his followers persist in their endeavours. The objections were removed by prefixing the word "Swanirvar" to the title Gram Sarkar to distinguish the proposed village institution from the existing ones.³⁸ The Swanirvar Gram Sarkars, too, were to have no patronage from the government, and were to be run by the villagers on their own.
The military government that took over power in November 1975, issued a new Local Government Ordinance in 1976, retaining the Union Parishads with some changes in their composition. The office of the Vice-Chairman was abolished. The Union Parishads were to consist of twelve members including two women and a Chairman. The term of office of the Parishad was five years, and the Chairman was vested with all executive powers. According to the Ordinance, the government could exercise supervision and control over the Union Parishads to ensure that their activities conformed to the purposes stated in the order. It also provided the Sub-Divisional Officer with the authority to direct, suspend, or otherwise control Union Parishads. In short, central control was "visible in all the parts of the Union Parishad." None of the governments that had ruled Bangladesh since independence demonstrated their willingness to reduce central control over rural local institutions.

Not being sure of their political power and support, the new military rulers of Bangladesh decided to postpone the national elections which were scheduled for 1977. Instead, elections to the local councils were held. As political parties were not permitted to operate at the time, candidates for Union Parishad membership contested the election as independents. Their political affiliations were known to the electorate, however. A survey revealed that about forty-seven per cent of the elected members had some "form of association with the Awami
League" at one time or another, and twenty-three per cent of the "elected village leaders claimed to be supporters of the Muslim League and other right wing parties."\textsuperscript{3} The military recognized the potential threat to their position in the political arena and sought to win over these local leaders. Programmes were implemented to train members of local bodies to perform their duties better, attempts were made to bring the village leaders closer to the government through meetings and conferences, and members were sent abroad for training. In spite of the gradual success of these strategies, the need became obvious for a party organization which would be instrumental in attracting and holding the support of local leaders.

Meanwhile, the military government under the leadership of Zia sought to restore stability and promised a return to democracy. The first step was a plebiscite in 1977 ascertaining support for the leadership of Zia. More than ninety-nine per cent affirmative votes were cast in his favour. This was followed by a presidential election in May 1978 which returned Zia to power by a large margin. The Jatiyatabadi Front (the nationalist front), a coalition of six political parties which put forward Zia as the presidential candidate in 1978, was dissolved a few months after the election. In its place, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was formed in September 1978 with Zia as Chairman.

After the formation of the BNP, attempts were made to extend the organization rapidly and establish power bases in rural Bangladesh. A strong rural base was deemed essential for
the BNP to compete with other political parties, especially the AL, its most powerful rival. In addition to this, the divergent forces in the party had to be made cohesive. The BNP had to form the government and run the administration of the country. The agrarian economy of Bangladesh called for rapid development, and the party was expected to play the role of the guiding force for the government in executing rural development programmes. Thus, it is not surprising that Zia's government, like many other governments in the developing world, decided to introduce representative local government as a "nation-building" instrument.

The BNP nominated 298 candidates in the parliamentary elections held in 1979, and 207 were elected. The seats reserved for women in the Parliament went to the BNP as they were elected directly by the members of the Parliament. Some more seats were won by the party in subsequent by-elections, and a number of independent candidates joined the party after getting elected. Thus the party was in a very strong position in the Jatiya Sangsad (Parliament). A series of reforms and reorganizations took place within the party immediately after the elections. The party machinery was strengthened. The Cabinet was extended to include experts and professionals. These rapid moves resulted in a collection of wide variety of personalities and the BNP was rightly called "anything but a cohesive broad-based, and well-organized political party." The party was formed hastily and turned out to be a group of people with widely different ideologies and backgrounds.
Thus Zia's government set out to establish links with and control over the rural areas through reorganization of the local government system. In June 1980, an Act of the Bangladesh Parliament formally established a nation-wide system of Swanirvar Gram Sarkars. These village-based units of eleven members were to be headed by a Gram Pradhan (village headman). The Swanirvar Gram Sarkar was to be chosen through negotiation and reconciliation in an assembly of the Gram Shava (village assembly) which could be attended by all adult residents of the village. The assemblies were directed to ensure representation in the Swanirvar Gram Sarkars of the various classes and professions in keeping with the demographic nature of the village concerned. As well, a minimum of two women were to be chosen as members. Swanirvar Gram Sarkars would take care of local problems, maintain law and order, promote family planning, and attempt to double food production through a self-reliant economy. By the end of 1980, sixty-eight thousand Gram Sarkars had been officially organized in Bangladesh.

Zia was reported as "serious about creating a new power structure from the grass roots level through the establishment of Gram Sarkar at the lowest level and by installing union-level development coordinators and district development coordinators higher up." These bodies were to be utilized as links between the villagers and the capital. Rural development activities would receive a boost as these would be administered locally, thus facilitating local participation. The scheme would also help the BNP to extend its organization into the rural society.
and win support of local influentials by dispensing benefits to them. The *Far Eastern Economic Review* commented that once Zia was "able to install his village government system and improve the food situation through increased production, it would be difficult for any political party. . . to dislodge him."

All previous attempts at reforming local government had somehow stopped prior to reaching the villages; this was the first time that genuine village-based institutions were established. The government recognized that previously, apart from the *Union Parishads*, people's representation in planning and decision-making through elected bodies was practically absent. In the draft of the Second Five Year Plan, the government of Bangladesh stated its intention to bring local government to the grass-root level of the villages through "democratically elected bodies."

To summarize, since 1971 there have been a number of changes in the area of local government in Bangladesh. But a closer examination of the President's Orders, Ordinances, Rules and parliamentary amendments show that little substantial alteration was intended. The changes were suggested by advisors and politicians who operated in the capital, and the Ministry issued notices and circulars to the field offices to arrange for their implementation. Government officials in the outlying areas were put in charge of various local and rural development projects. This negated the benefits that could be reaped from spontaneous local participation. Control by government officials inhibited the normal growth of democratic local
institutions. This contradiction of designing democratic local councils, yet retaining control through government officials, made reforms in local government ineffective.

The birth of Bangladesh resulted in increased political awareness among the rural population. The desire to participate in local affairs rose, and the expansion of local bodies was supposed to absorb those demands. But the scarcity of available resources made local government reforms extremely difficult. Intense competition among local groups to gain control of meagre resources was reinforced by the fact that the previous Basic Democracy system from the pre-independence days had left a small group in an advantageous position in the rural areas. This group viewed any change in the system as a threat to their positions and made all efforts to obstruct their implementation. While government decrees and regulations failed to make any impact, the initiative of the Swanirvar Bangladesh Andolon yielded some success. The government decided to use the strategy on a large scale for the entire country, and steps were taken accordingly. In 1980, Bangladesh was on the brink of another change which was expected to bring about major improvements in the field of local government.
NOTES


9 See Tushar K. Barua, Political Elite in Bangladesh (Berne: Peter Lang, 1978), Chapter I.


11 Ibid., p. 12.

12 Ibid., pp. 23-4.


15 Khan and Latif, op. cit., pp. 18-19.
20 Ibid., p. 75.
25 M.A. Chashi, "Three Years of Swanirvar, 1976-78."
31 Shawkat Ali, op. cit., p. 86.
34 Ibid, p. 92.
35 Interview with Mr. Monotosh Das, Coordinator of Swanirvar Bangladesh. Dhaka, July 10, 1982.
37 Films and Publication Division, Government of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. "Bangladesher Unnati Kebol Swanirvar Andoloner Madhyamei Hotey Parey" [Bangladesh can prosper only through the Swanirvar movement]. Address of the President and discussions during his visit to Naldanga union in Rangpur district on July 5 and 6, 1979.
38 Interview with Mr. Monotosh Das. Dhaka, July 10, 1982.
41 See Articles 69, 70, 71, 72 and 73 of the Local Government Ordinance, 1976.
IV. GRAM SARKAR IN THE POLITICAL CONTEXT: LEGISLATION, STRUCTURES AND FUNCTIONS

THE EMERGENCE OF ZIA

Politics in Bangladesh entered a new phase in 1975. A series of military coups and countercoups removed the Awami League (AL) from power. For the first time since independence, the military got involved in politics. The undisputed leader of the liberation movement, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and his family were killed by a group of young army officers. The AL had lost its popularity and there was no other political party capable or resourceful enough to provide the country with alternative leadership. The Jatiya Samajtantrik Dal (JSD, the national socialist party), probably next in popularity to the AL, also fell into discredit and its effectiveness ended with the execution of Colonel Abu Taher.

In the absence of well organized political parties, the military became the only credible source of leadership. Attempts to establish dissident leaders of the AL as head of the government had failed. Khondakar Mushtaq Ahmed, a former Minister of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman's cabinet, was installed as the President after the coup of August, 1975. The Mushtaq government's achievements were few. It "dropped the district reorganization scheme and ordered the retention of the original nineteen districts with Deputy Commissioners as the head of the district administration." Mushtaq announced dates for the revival of political activities and holding general elections. Within three months, however, he was forced to resign following
a second military coup in early November. Two other sources of non-political leadership, the judiciary and the bureaucracy, were examined by the leaders of the coup. Ultimately, the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court of Bangladesh, A.S.M. Sayem was asked to assume the office of the President. Members of the armed services, the judiciary and the bureaucracy continued to play prominent roles in the politics of Bangladesh over the next few years. The military, being the most organized and powerful, remained ahead of the other groups.

Within the armed forces, a power struggle was developing between some junior officers who had engineered the August 1975 coup, and the senior officers. The high-ranking officers were not in agreement about the course of action to be followed. As a result, the second coup and a countercoup took place. By the middle of November 1975, some of the senior officers were killed or removed from service. Major General Ziaur Rahman (Zia) emerged as the new leader of the armed forces and, as well, of Bangladesh. Justice Sayem, the President, was allowed to continue in office as the Chief Martial Law Administrator with the three service chiefs as Deputy Chief Martial Law Administrators. However, since the country was under Martial Law and the army was the most prominent branch among the armed services, the army chief, Zia became the most powerful person in Bangladesh.

Zia rose to the occasion and soon had the situation under control. Most of the JSD leaders were arrested, and it seemed that discipline had been restored in the army. There were
attempts by local political parties to subvert the government, and in some areas, followers of Mujib launched raids from across the Indian border. However, Zia survived all of these problems, and took over as the President in 1977. He called a referendum which showed that over ninety-nine per cent of the voters supported his leadership. One of the factors which Rashiduzzaman has attributed to this overwhelming endorsement was the "unqualified support of a majority" of the newly elected Union Parishad members. It must be noted that these members had in the past been affiliated with other political parties, mainly the AL and the Muslim League (ML). This demonstrates that the local government leadership in Bangladesh can easily be won over by the ruling party or group. Their changeability may be due to the fact that no regime has yet returned to power after being removed from office in Bangladesh. In fact, the democratic practice of peacefully transferring power through elections has never taken place in Bangladesh. At the local level, the political affiliations of most of the leaders are known to the villagers. But the leaders do not want to be marked as opponents of the regime; thus, publicly, they work for the government. The government, for its part, does not care much about the past political activities of local leaders so long as they are willing to support the government and help it to continue in power.

Zia tried to utilize this sentiment by arranging to bring the village leaders closer to the government through seminars, workshops, and training programmes conducted at the capital.
Soon, a number of local leaders started announcing their allegiance to Zia instead of to any political party. But many problems plagued Zia as he tried to rule the country under Martial Law. An abortive coup attempt in 1977 made it clear that there were dissatisfied groups within the army. The indiscipline prevalent among the military could result in public resentment and raise questions about the leadership of military officers. There were frequent reports of violence in the rural areas. It became evident that Zia had to have a power base outside the armed forces to establish the legitimacy of his regime. This could only be achieved by organizing a political party which would be able to secure a majority of seats in the Parliament. Since the rural areas would elect most of the legislators, Zia had to start wooing the rural voters to accomplish this objective.

The Local Government Ordinance, 1976 was made by the President in November, 1976 "to provide for the constitution of local government institutions in rural areas and to consolidate and amend certain laws relating to local government in such areas." It also authorized the government to constitute Gram Parishads (village councils) for the purpose of overall development of the village.
THE BANGLADESH NATIONALIST PARTY

After securing overwhelming support for his leadership in the referendum held in 1977, a new political party called the Jatiyatabadi Gonotantrik Dal (the nationalist democratic party or JAGODAL) was organized under the leadership of Zia in February 1978. In April 1978, Zia ordered presidential elections to be held in June of the same year. The JAGODAL formed a coalition with the National Awami Party (NAP, pro-Peking), the United People's Party (UPP), the ML and the Tapshili Federation and called it the Jatiyatabadi Front (JF or Nationalist Front). The opposition was called the Gonotantrik Oikka Jote (GOJ) and included the AL, the NAP (pro-Moscow), People's League, Jatiya Janata Party, Krishak Sramik Party, and the Jatiya League. Zia, the candidate of the JF, polled about three-quarters of the votes in the presidential election defeating the candidate of the GOJ, General (Retired) M.A.G. Osmany, a former member of the Mujib cabinet. The JF was dissolved a few months after the election. In its place, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) was formed in September 1978. Shortly afterwards, the party announced a wide range of socio-economic programmes.

The leadership of the BNP included former members of the ML, the NAP (both pro-Moscow and pro-Peking factions), the AL, as well as military officers and members of the judiciary. A number of businessmen and executives from the private sector were inducted directly into the cabinet. The BNP fielded 298 candidates in the parliamentary elections of 1979, and 207 were
elected. Zia's personal image and his vigorous campaigning in support of his incumbent Ministers and other candidates he wanted in the Parliament — many of whom had very little direct connection to their constituencies — won the seats for the BNP. The AL was split into two factions, and the larger group came under the leadership of a former Minister of Sheikh Mujib's cabinet, Abdul Malek Ukil. The AL-MU put up 295 candidates for the Parliament. Only 39 were returned and this demonstrated the tremendous popularity of Zia. Thus, Zia's personal image, along with the votes carried by the former members of other political parties, put the BNP in a strong position in the Parliament. However, it must also be noted that for the first time in the history of Bangladesh, a substantial number of the members of the Parliament belonged to opposition parties.

Outside the Parliament, the BNP needed to establish a strong support base for its continued existence. In order to present a concrete programme to the electorate, Zia had prepared a nineteen-point plan. The nineteen points included, among others, the following goals: to make Bangladesh a self-reliant nation; to ensure people's participation in all spheres and levels of administration; to strengthen the rural economy by giving top priority to agriculture; to make the country self-sufficient in food; to remove the curse of illiteracy; to check population growth; and to decentralize administration. These steps could only be implemented through a well-organized party machine with a strong base. Zia's rural-oriented policies were expected to make the BNP popular in the rural areas. The BNP
experienced tension as the divergent elements within the party came into conflict with one another. Although some prominent leaders left the BNP, Zia was able to hold the party together. Better management of the economy in comparison to the previous regime and Zia's image as an honest and dedicated leader increased the rural electorate's trust in the abilities of the government.

The growing popularity and success, however limited, of the Swanirvar Bangladesh Andolon in developing self-reliant villages in different parts of the country appeared to have provided a viable solution to the problems of rural development in Bangladesh. In fact, the idea of forming elected village-based organizations had also been contemplated by other political parties. The General Secretary of the JSD, A.S.M. Abdur Rab claimed that his party had mapped out a Gram Sarkar scheme in 1976. In it, the village council was to be elected through adult franchise in the presence of the villagers. The AL also wanted elected representatives to rule the villages. At the time of their fall from power, the party leaders had plans to decentralize administration after forming multilateral cooperatives in the villages. It was easier for Zia to sell the idea to his party and make preparations to introduce the system within a short period since the BNP was in control of the government as well as the legislature.

The government faced several problems around this time. Floods, high prices of essential commodities, a dissatisfied urban middle class, and inflation were too much to be handled
efficiently at one time. These problems, along with the expansion of the number of unemployed and landless, eroded social values and resulted in a deterioration of the law and order all over the country. There was political unrest, expressed in strikes, outbursts of political violence, widespread disorders in prisons, and armed action by "miscreants" in the Chittagong Hill Tracts.\textsuperscript{10} The government was under tremendous pressure from all sides, pressure which was aggravated by the abortive coup attempt. There was very little time to expand and strengthen Zia's power base. He tried to do it by visiting remote rural areas and propounding village-oriented policies and programmes of decentralization. According to the Prime Minister, Shah Azizur Rahman, the BNP had "emerged as a well-knit rural based organization capable of functioning as a rallying forum of public opinion" within a year of its formation.\textsuperscript{11}

Early in 1980, Zia appointed twenty members of Parliament belonging to the BNP as District Development Coordinators to assist in implementing different development schemes in the districts and to entertain and process public complaints.\textsuperscript{12} On April 16, he announced plans to set up \textbf{Gram Sarkar} in each village starting in May. The decision was taken at a meeting of the Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners, and an official spokesman said that "its main objective was to foster leadership in the villages for taking care of the local problems."\textsuperscript{13} On April 30, Zia inaugurated a \textbf{Gram Sarkar} in a village under Savar police station in Dhaka district.
Meanwhile, the draft of the Second Five Year Plan for Bangladesh published in May 1980 stated that a village level corporate body was proposed "to be created within a hierarchical system of local government with a view to undertaking comprehensive rural development." The village government was to have a village land and employment plan and to implement it as far as possible without disturbing ownership. The Draft claimed that the issue had been discussed and debated for two years.¹

Thus, plans were being implemented even before the representatives in the Parliament had a chance to discuss the issue and make decisions.

Political activities at the centre appeared to be aimed at setting up a network of control through the BNP. Zia's nineteen-points were played up as the regime's answer to the problems facing Bangladesh. The aim was to attract politicians of various inclinations to the BNP by emphasizing Bangladeshi nationalism and self-reliance. The strategy succeeded and the BNP took in members who previously belonged to political parties of various ideologies. In his efforts to appeal to the rural electorate, Zia highlighted the negligence of the previous governments to improve conditions in the villages when he addressed gatherings in the remote areas. He repeatedly stated that the BNP was determined to take politics out of the urban areas and bring it to the villages.

In the rural areas, the Basic Democracies system had been replaced by elected bodies at the union, thana and district levels. The positions of the Basic Democrats were occupied by
members of the relief committees constituted by the AL after independence, with the result that little change occurred in the rural power structure. The relief committees were dominated by supporters of the AL who had some influence in the rural areas. They were able to use the committees to their advantage and soon became as affluent as their predecessors, the Basic Democrats. The AL had always represented the interest of surplus farmers in the villages and professionals and small entrepreneurs in the urban areas. From 1971 to 1975, the surplus farmers became affluent and the AL generally neglected the interests of the rural poor. The end of the AL rule, however, did not bring about major changes. The same group of leaders along with some former members of the Basic Democracies came to the fore in the local council elections of 1977. Thus, in most villages, there was a group of leaders with some experience in local politics, and the villagers elected them to the local bodies. The group retained control in the face of tensions resulting from some upward mobility among its members and continued accumulation of wealth by the affluent. The BNP decided to use such groups to extend its base in the rural areas and took various steps to bring these leaders close to the government.

The scenario thus described was hardly conducive to the introduction of major reforms. Bangladesh had not yet recovered from the traumas of the liberation war, nor from the coups and countercoups which shook the society after 1975. Even when it seemed that Zia was in control, there were attempts to undermine the authority of the government. The government was composed of
leaders of diverse ideological orientations, some of which contradicted one another. The situation was not stable enough to allow complete decentralization. The government had to look out for subversive activities. The economy had not recovered sufficiently from previous slumps to permit allocation of enough resources for local government institutions to perform well. The dominant groups from the days of Basic Democracy and AL rule were not going to surrender their control over village institutions. There was bound to be a bitter struggle over major changes in the villages. Due to the scarcity of resources and an increase in the number of rural poor, the influentials would form factions to gain control of the available resources and the local institutions.

As the Zia regime continued in power, inevitable conflicts began to emerge among the BNP leadership. The 1979 parliamentary elections returned the largest number of opposition members to the Bangladesh Jatiya Sangsad. As the opposition tried to organize themselves in an attempt to challenge the BNP's claim to power, Zia's need to establish a solid support base for the party became critical. At the same time, he had to settle conflicts within the party and discipline some leaders to maintain a good image for the BNP and his own position. Encountering challenges both from within the party and outside, Zia had to prove to the electorate that he was capable of introducing major changes, especially in the rural areas. Since he did not have concrete plans for extending local government institutions to the villages, he decided to draw upon
the existing structure of the village councils organized by the Swanirvar Bangladesh Andolan.

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF SWANIRVAR GRAM SARKAR

The government's decision to go ahead with the proposed Gram Sarkars demonstrated the urgency to execute the plans. Three weeks after the inauguration of the first Gram Sarkar, the Bangladesh Gazette (Extraordinary) containing the Swanirvar Gram Sarkars (Constitution and Administration) Rules, 1980 was published. Rules were laid down for the formation of Gram Sarkares in every village. The Circle Officer (C.O.) was given the authority to declare any rural area a village, and to convene a meeting of the Gram Shava (village assembly) consisting of the residents of the village whose names appeared on the voters' list.

The Gram Shava was to choose a Gram Pradhan and eleven other members, of whom at least two would be women. The Gram Sarkar would be chosen according to the consensus of the people present at the meeting "in such a manner as may be agreed upon". The representation of people from "all walks of life" and "different functional/interest groups" was to be ensured. The choice through consensus of the Gram Sarkar was to be recorded and signed by the C.O. The term of office of the Gram Sarkar was three years from the date of its first meeting for the first term and five years for subsequent terms. The Gram Sarkar was
to assume office within thirty days of its selection at a meeting to be appointed by the C.O. The required qualifications for a Gram Pradhan or a member of Gram Sarkar were as follows; he/she must

(a) be a citizen of Bangladesh;
(b) have attained the age of twenty-five years;
(c) be listed on the electoral roll of the concerned village;
(d) not be a sitting member or Chairman of a Union Parishad; and
(e) reside permanently in the village.\textsuperscript{16}

The Gram Sarkar was to undertake "such functions as it considers necessary for overall development of the village and, in particular, for

(a) Increase in food production;
(b) Mass literacy;
(c) Population control and family planning; and
(d) Law and order, and settling local disputes."\textsuperscript{17}

"Save and otherwise provided in these rules or in any direction issued thereunder, the executive powers of a Swanirvar Gram Sarkar shall vest in and be exercised by its Gram Pradhan."\textsuperscript{18} The rules also stipulated that there would be an office of the Gram Sarkar within the village, and that the minutes of the meetings of the council be recorded in a book kept for this purpose. The Gram Shava was to meet every three months to review the progress of the activities of the Gram Sarkar. It was to be convened by the Gram Pradhan stating the
date, time and place of the meeting and the agenda to be discussed. The financial sources of Gram Sarkar were to be: (a) contributions from individuals, Gram Samabay Samiti (village cooperative societies) or any institution or local authority; and (b) any other income from any legitimate source. The government shall exercise general supervision and control over a Swanirvar Gram Sarkar in order to ensure that its activities conform to the purposes of these rules. The government could enquire into the affairs of the Gram Sarkar through its officers and supersede the council for some time. In case of disputes between two or more Gram Sarkars or between Gram Sarkars and any local parishad, the matter was to be referred to: (a) the Prescribed Authority, if the parties concerned are in the same thana. In relation to Swanirvar Gram Sarkar, the Thana Parishad will be the Prescribed Authority. (b) the Subdivisional Officer, if the parties concerned are in the same subdivision; (c) the Deputy Commissioner, if the parties concerned are in the same district; (d) the Commissioner, if the parties concerned are in different districts within the same division; and (e) the Government, if the parties concerned are in different divisions; and the decision of the authority to which the dispute was so
referred would be final.  

The government had laid down the rules for constituting and operating Gram Sarkar in such a way as to allow government officials to play a prominent role. The C.O. could determine the boundaries of a village, was responsible for convening a meeting of the Gram Shava and constituting the Gram Sarkar. There were provisions for the supersession of the village body in case of failure or inability to discharge its duties, acting in a manner contrary to public interest, or abuse of power. The sources which were expected to supply the required funds were vague, and did not guarantee a regular flow of resources. The Gram Sarkar would have to depend on the government for funds. Later, President Zia told members of Gram Sarkars at the conclusion of a training course that the Ministry of Local Government was given absolute authority to look into the functioning of the village councils. 

PARLIAMENTARY APPROVAL AND LEGISLATION

Finally, a bill was prepared to legislate the creation of Gram Sarkar. The timing of introducing the bill to the Parliament coincided with a couple of other controversial bills. The annual Budget had been brought down a few days previously, and the members were busy discussing it, when suddenly on June 21 1980, three bills were introduced for legislation on the same day. Early in the day, the Dockworkers (Appointment Control)
Bill was placed before the House. The bill was on the agenda for discussion for the day, but the Minister asked the members to consider it for legislation. Several members of the opposition protested and requested more time to review the bill. They could not suggest any amendment because they had not even read the bill. The government party found the opposition unprepared and passed the bill within half an hour. The suggestion of six opposition members not to approve a related ordinance previously was overruled without voting. The leader of the House said that the dockworkers would lose their fair share of wages if the bill were not passed on that date. Twelve members of the opposition spoke against the quick legislation of the bill, and one member of the AL-MU walked out of the House.²⁴

On the same day, the Municipal (Amendment) Act, 1980 met strong opposition in the Parliament. This was another attempt to convert an earlier ordinance into a law. Previously, the appeal of some members of the opposition not to approve the ordinance was nullified in a voice vote. The opposition members of the House suggested that the bill be circulated for public opinion, and sent to a Select Committee as well as the permanent Committee on Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives. The bill was legislated in spite of bitter debate and stiff opposition. No amendments or modifications were made.²⁵

Later on that fateful Saturday, the Local Government (Amendment) Act, 1980 was moved by Captain (Retired) Abdul Halim Choudhury, the Minister for Local Government, Rural Development
and Cooperatives. The bill intended to "amend the Local Government (Ordinance), 1976 with a view to making provision for the constitution of Swanirvar Gram Sarkars, a village level tier of local government on self-help basis so that the villagers can be made conscious of their community problems and participate in the creation of a society, viable economically and otherwise, through Swanirvar Gram Sarkars." The Act would be deemed to have come into force on April 29, 1980.\(^2\)

Before the bill was moved, the Deputy Leader of the opposition, Mohiuddin Ahmed said that the bill deserved a long and elaborate discussion in the House. It should, therefore, be moved later on when the general discussion on the Budget was not in the way. He criticized the practice of rushing bills through the House by the government. In response, the leader of the House, Shah Azizur Rahman said that the tenure of the Local Government (Amendment) Ordinance, 1980 would lapse at midnight on the same day, and demanded that the bill be passed on June 21, 1980.\(^2\)

The opposition members expressed their doubt regarding the sincerity of the government in introducing the bill in the interest of the villagers. They expressed apprehension that the government was planning to create a class of "village touts to perpetuate the BNP rule" through Gram Sarkars. Abdul Latif Mirza, a member from the JSD, urged the government to allocate at least seventy per cent of the national budget for village development and to award full autonomy to the Gram Sarkars. He said that the Union Parishads were controlled by government
officials and that they impeded the operation of local bodies. Another member of the JSD, Shahjahan Siraj, had moved a disapproval motion against the ordinance that established Gram Sarkar. He accused the BNP of using the system to establish a dictatorship. He said he was not opposed to the concept of village governments. But he protested the steps taken by the government to set up Gram Sarkar without discussing it in Parliament and without the approval of the representatives of the people.

Shahjahan Siraj pointed out the dangers of government officials and BNP leaders going to the villages and drawing up lists of Gram Sarkar members to be approved by the villagers by "consensus". He called for the elimination of the dominance of government officials and for the creation of Gram Sarkars as elected bodies. There must be representation of different occupational groups and they should have adequate authority to resist domination by government officials. Shahjahan Siraj commented that Zia was playing with the Gram Sarkar system, cancelling and reviving it at his convenience. He concluded that there was no organized structure or budget for the Gram Sarkars, and that these bodies could not work for the welfare of the villagers.28

A.B.M. Taleb Ali of the AL-MU recognized that informal village councils had operated in the countryside for many years. He expressed his apprehension over the possibility that a powerful group of villagers would use the Gram Sarkar institutions to their advantage. He also detected an attempt to
realize the political ambitions of the BNP in the scheme. A.K. Rafiqullah Choudhury of the Gono Front admitted the utility of village councils and government. But he thought that this was not the proper time to introduce such a scheme, and the society must be prepared beforehand for such changes. Sixteen other members of the opposition took part in the debate and criticized the bill, but to no avail.

All the amendment motions of the opposition members seeking to elicit public opinion on the bill and to send it to the Select Committee were rejected by a voice vote in the House. In response to the criticism of the bill, the Minister for Local Government assured the House that the Swanirvar Gram Sarkars would remain above the "political feuds". He said that the bill was introduced as President Zia believed in taking politics to the villages and their inhabitants, and had already established a link with the village people. The Minister said that the opposition members did not like the bill because Zia had made politics difficult for those who practised politics with bases only in the towns.

The Local Government (Amendment) Act, 1980 was passed amidst objections from the opposition members. No information is available regarding the voting procedure followed in the House on this bill. Gram Sarkar had been planned, initiated and was already in operation when the government approached the Parliament for approval. None of the suggestions put forward by the opposition members were incorporated in the Act. The bill was introduced along with two other controversial bills in the
middle of the discussion on the Budget. The government was determined to rush the bills through the legislature, and had them passed with little opportunity for debate or discussion. The opposition had no success in stopping or modifying any of the bills.

SOME OBSERVATIONS

The sequence of steps taken by the government in bringing about Gram Sarkar is interesting. Instead of following the normal procedure of making proposals, legislating the bill and formulating rules, the government of Bangladesh under the leadership of the BNP directly laid down the rules for constituting and operating local government. Next, the proposals for village organizations were published with the draft of the Second Five Year Plan. After that, the bill establishing Gram Sarkar was presented to the Parliament. The government was in a hurry to establish the village councils and have its supporters installed as leaders.

Two days after the legislation of the bill, Zia inaugurated a training course for Gram Sarkar Pradhans and Sachibs (Secretaries). He said that political opportunists were opposing Gram Sarkar, but his party had the mandate of the people. Opposition leaders continued to criticize the scheme, but the government insisted that it was essential to build a just society.
The creation of village-based local government institutions was observed with interest by people not involved directly in the politics of Bangladesh. An American political scientist, Harry Blair considered various criticisms levelled against the Gram Sarkar. He agreed that the programme appeared too vague and nebulous. There were bound to be complications in the relationships between the Gram Sarkars and the Union Parishads, the Integrated Rural Development Programme, the Rural Works and Food for Works Programme. The pace of expansion of the new institution was too rapid. There were possibilities of new avenues for corruption. The Gram Sarkars could be taken over by the same dominant elites that controlled local institutions previously, and the benefits could be diverted to already affluent rural elites. There was also the danger that patronage might be funneled down to the local level by the ruling party so that village elites could be utilized as a support base for the party in power at the centre.

Blair admitted that all these consequences were possible, but he still considered Gram Sarkar an absolutely necessary, although not sufficient, condition for long term rural development. He regarded the recognition of the different interest groups that make up village society and their inclusion within a structure of governance as a major advancement in the history of local government on the subcontinent. The poor rural majority had the opportunity to voice their demands. Blair realized that initially the poor villagers could probably be intimidated and dominated by the rural elite. But over the
longer term, after a higher level of literacy and consciousness had been achieved, the mechanism could be used to serve the interests of the poor.³⁴

The government developed a Swanirvar Gram Sarkar Manual for helping Gram Sarkar members to understand and execute their duties and responsibilities. The duties and specific functions of each Gram Sarkar member were elaborated. The Gram Pradhan was to be in charge of finance, planning and coordination in the village. He would convene a meeting of Gram Sarkar every fortnight and inform the villagers of the date, time and place of the meeting. He would maintain close links with the government officials working in the village. All decisions were to be made by the entire council and not by the Gram Pradhan on his own.

The Sadasya-Sachib (Member-Secretary) of the Gram Sarkar was to be in charge of office management and religious affairs. He would assist the Gram Pradhan in all matters and maintain records of Gram Sarkar business. The other ten members were to be entrusted with one of the following: law, order and security; food and agriculture; fisheries and livestock; cooperatives and cooperative banks; communication, works and tree plantation; mass education; youth, sports and cultural affairs; family planning and women's affairs; cottage industries; and health.³⁵

The manual listed various problems and suggested how Gram Sarkar members could tackle them in each of these areas. A survey of each village was emphasized to determine possible solutions.

Financial management, including the maintenance of funds,
budgeting, accounting and auditing, was stated to be very important in the manual. The Gram Sarkar must maintain account books and records of other transactions and these would be audited regularly.\textsuperscript{36} In another publication of the Ministry of Local Government, food deficiency, illiteracy, improper family planning, poor law and order maintenance, and the absence of cooperatives were pointed out as major problems obstructing national development, and Gram Sarkars were asked to pay attention to these problems.\textsuperscript{37} The National Institute of Local Government published a Swanirvar Gram Sarkar Training Guide which included detailed discussion of problems and the syllabi to be followed in training members of Gram Sarkar.\textsuperscript{38} But this guide only included agriculture, family planning, eradication of illiteracy, cooperatives, livestock care and pisciculture as the areas in which the members needed training, and did not strictly follow the division elaborated in the Swanirvar Gram Sarkar Manual. The guide attached more importance to these problems. This was an indication of poor coordination among different government agencies and departments. Each emphasized different problems in the villages.

The government put the Gram Sarkar in operation, formulated an ordinance, framed detailed rules and regulations, and then legislated the bill. All opposition to the government's plans was ignored and Gram Sarkar was established exactly the way the government wanted it. All the political parties favoured the idea of village government, but apprehensions were voiced about the role of public officials and political opportunists in the
system. The General Secretary of the JSD commented that Zia's Gram Sarkar would favour the bourgeoisie and not the proletariat since this was not going to be an elected body.\textsuperscript{39}

In the summer of 1980, Gram Sarkar started to function and soon faced problems. Zia visited several villages and addressed Gram Sarkar delegates in the capital, urging them to make the scheme successful. Local conflicts and rivalry emerged in some cases. In one instance, there were three candidates for the position of Gram Pradhan in a village in Chittagong district. The C.O. realized that all three candidates were influential, and orally divided the village into three villages. Three positions of Gram Pradhan were created, so that all three candidates could be accommodated.\textsuperscript{80} There were reports of election, selection by consensus, and frequently, selection of Gram Sarkar councils by the few people who bothered to come to the inaugural meeting. Many villagers were not even informed about the meetings. There were incidences of violence and in a few cases lives were lost over the formation of Gram Sarkar. The councils were formed in divergent ways in different villages and the violence indicated that consensus was not always reached in these matters.

There have been some studies on the characteristics and backgrounds of Gram Sarkar leaders in its early stages. Manjur-ul-Alam found that in most cases, the position of Gram Pradhan was occupied by relatively younger people, having education from grades six to ten. They owned, on an average, six acres of land, and 41.67 per cent of the sample surveyed were affiliated
with the BNP. Over 98 per cent of the Gram Pradhans "belonged to higher families who traditionally dominated the politico-economic and social scenes of the rural societies." Other surveys confirmed the fact that Gram Sarkar members came from the better-off groups in the village. The only noticeable difference was that the average age of the village leaders was less. But as these young people came mostly from the influential families in the villages, the same elite group continued to dominate rural politics. Alam and Mukabber found that 61 per cent of the Gram Sarkar Member-Secretaries interviewed by them were under 30 years of age, and they had a higher level of education than the Gram Pradhan. A significant proportion of these leaders came "from large landholding class." Barket-e-Khuda, Khan and Saha added more evidence through their research in a village in Comilla district. They stated that the Gram Sarkar leaders "represent the top (rung of) social and economic ladder in the village and have become involved in the Gram Sarkar to further their own interest at the cost of the general interests of the poor and needy villagers at large." They found that Gram Sarkar in the villages' under study represented the "same old vested groups who have always been in control of productive resources and various institutions at village level."

The ills and benefits likely to result from Gram Sarkar have been pointed out in different studies. These factors must have influenced the outcome of attempts to reform local government at the village level. It will be useful, in this
context, to compare the government's prescribed form of Gram Sarkar with those operating in the villages. Did the selection and organization of Gram Sarkar conform to the procedures suggested by the government? Did the village councils follow the Swanirvar Gram Sarkar Manual and other training manuals published for their use? Did the Gram Sarkars have enough resources and adequate authority to operate efficiently? Did local conflicts and rivalry impede the operation of Gram Sarkars? How far was the scheme successful as a reform in the local government system? What were the reasons for success or failure?

So far, I have considered the view from the top, and surveyed local government reforms in Bangladesh. While the foreign rulers always retained control of local bodies, the governments in independent Bangladesh neglected local government for some time. Finally, a major change was ushered in 1980 by extending local government institutions to the villages. In order to understand the reasons for failure of local government reforms, it is also essential to consider the view from the bottom. An examination of the formation and operation of Gram Sarkar in the villages will reveal more about the problems encountered in reforming local government in Bangladesh.

With this purpose in mind, I have examined Gram Sarkar in three villages of Bangladesh. A village was chosen from each of the districts of Mymensingh, Comilla and Rajshahi. They represent the central, south-eastern, and north-western regions of the country. The villages were chosen at random, with some
attention paid to accessibility and availability of data. I lived in each village for about a month in the summer of 1982. *Gram Sarkars* were almost inoperative by that time, and in July 1982, were officially abolished. Nevertheless, I have tried in the next three chapters to draw a picture of the progress and problems faced by the new village institutions during their short term of operation.
NOTES

1 For details on the JSD's role and Colonel Taher's contribution to the countercoup of November 7, 1975, see Lawrence Lifschultz, Bangladesh: The Unfinished Revolution (London: Zed Press, 1979).


5 The Local Government Ordinance, 1976, Article 85.


9 This was stated by Mr. Anwar Choudhury, a former Office Secretary of the Awami League. He was interviewed in Dhaka on July 19, 1982.


12 Azizul Haque, op. cit., p. 192.

13 The Bangladesh Observer, April 17, 1980.


22. The Bangladesh Gazette, May 24, 1980, Rule 34.
34. Ibid.
36. Ibid., pp. 24-5.


Ibid., p. 28.
V. ISOLATION AND INACTION: GRAM SARKAR IN MANTALA, MYMENSINGH

The new scheme of Gram Sarkar hardly affected the way of life in Mantala, a village located in the district of Mymensingh. Formally, the scheme brought about a new institution with a set of leaders in charge of various tasks in the village. But the lack of preparedness on the part of Mantala to respond to the new local institution negated any progress. Still in the very early stage of mobilization, the village has not developed a "commitment to action". The efforts to ensure control by the followers of the ruling party resulted in the exclusion of capable villagers from the Gram Sarkar. The isolation of Mantala from the rest of the country could not be broken, and gradually Gram Sarkar became inactive long before the institution was abolished.

THE VILLAGE

Mymensingh, an administrative district of Bangladesh, is situated in the north-central part of the country. It covers an area of 5039.76 square miles and has a population of 6,543,000.\(^1\) Mymensingh is the third most populous district of Bangladesh; an average of 1,745 people inhabit one square mile, and this means there is 0.37 acre of land per person.\(^2\) The district is famous as a producer of jute, the principal cash crop of Bangladesh. Mantala is located in the south-eastern part of Mymensingh district under Bajitpur police station of Kishoreganj
Mantala is a small village with an area of less than half a square mile. No history has ever been written of Mantala, but it can be assumed that like most other Bangladesh villages, it developed over centuries as farmers assembled to cultivate the fertile lands of the Brahmaputra basin. According to the residents of the village, Mantala has been inhabited for over three centuries. Agriculture is still the principal occupation in Mantala. The procedures of managing village affairs in the early days were similar to those found in village panchayats all over the Indian subcontinent. The village elders and local influentials were included in the panchayat which aimed principally at maintaining law and order. The advent of British rule and the subsequent reorganization of the revenue system generated the need for local institutions. Beginning in the later half of the nineteenth century, local bodies were instituted in Mymensingh for the purpose of collecting the money on behalf of the government.

At first, the local bodies did not extend as far as Mantala, but were constituted at the subdivision headquarters, Kishoreganj. Then a Municipality was established in 1869 in Bajitpur, about two miles away from the village. In Mantala, village elders met to discuss matters of common concern, and arrived at decisions on various problems. As far as anyone can remember, the village did not experience any major conflict among the villagers in its early days.

Mantala has received very little outside assistance for
developmental works, and living conditions in the village are still primitive. The population of about a thousand villagers has only one primary school, and no qualified physician. Indigenous practitioners provide medical services. Roads are narrow and muddy. Agriculture suffers due to lack of irrigation facilities in the dry season. The economy is based on agriculture. Rice and jute are the principal crops. Pisciculture is carried on on a small scale and there is a poultry farm. There are no small industries. The population of Mantala has increased by about 20 per cent in the last decade. Approximately 85 per cent of the villagers are engaged in agriculture. A negligible number of residents work in the nearby towns. About 25 per cent of the population consist of non-workers, including children, the elderly and the handicapped.

Agriculture is still carried on in primitive ways in Mantala, except for the use of a few shallow and deep tube wells and power pumps. Productivity of rice varies from twenty to forty maunds per acre for the desi (local) variety, and fifty to eighty maunds per acre for the high yielding varieties. In most cases, hired cultivators bear the cost of cultivation and receive half of the output. In other cases, the costs are shared equally by the landowner and the hired cultivator, and the output is shared equally. The landowners are able to engage in gainful employment elsewhere, and the combined income from their land and other sources are adequate for living comfortably in Mantala. The landless labourers find it extremely difficult
to make ends meet. The loans from the government for pisciculture and poultry farming have not been utilized properly to expand these activities.

Agricultural products are marketed principally at Bajitpur and Dulalpur, both big markets within a couple of miles from Mantala. There were two authorized fertilizer dealers in the village, but they have closed down. At present, a dealer in Bajitpur supplies the fertilizers. Loans for the purchase of fertilizers are available from the Thana Irrigation Project of the government through the Krishi Bank at Bajitpur. A branch of the Sonali Bank, another nationalized bank, in the same town is also used by the people of Mantala. Private money lending business has never been prominent in the village. Apart from matters of great urgency, very little interaction takes place between Mantala and Bajitpur.

Mantala is five miles from the nearest railway station, Sarar Char. Part of the road to the village is metalled, and rickshaws and motorized scooters are used to transport people and goods. Telegraph and telephone facilities are available at Bajitpur. Newspapers reach Mantala from the capital within one day, but only a few of the villagers care to read them. The number of radio receiver sets is high, and there are a few battery-operated television sets. Electricity has not yet come to Mantala.

The population of Mantala is fairly homogenous. There are no Hindus or followers of religions other than Islam. The village has a population of 980 among whom 507 are males and 473
females, living in 190 households. The leadership of Mantala is provided by three influential families. These families are related to one another, and have never been engaged in direct conflict. Among themselves, these three families own about a third of the land in the village. Members of these families have held important positions in the local bodies throughout the history of Mantala. Over the last four decades, some members of these families have gone out to work in various professions, including medicine and engineering in the district town of Mymensingh, and the capital, Dhaka. Others have gone into business and acquired wealth. But these people do not reside permanently in the village. They maintain links with the family and visit Mantala periodically. All these factors have contributed to the influence of these families in Mantala. Since they own a substantial amount of land, they are able to employ sharecroppers and labourers to cultivate the land. Sometimes, the poor villagers compete with one another to secure cultivation rights, and the owner awards such rights to people he trusts. The professionals working in the cities are able to provide jobs to the illiterate or little educated village poor. The recipients of such favours are gratified and repay it by staying loyal to the family of the donor. This factor adds to the influence of the families with connections in the cities. In Mantala, these families continue to be the leaders.

There has been no noticeable change in the social composition of Mantala over the last few years. Literacy is around 12 per cent, about the same average as in Bajitpur thana,
but only approximately 5 per cent of the female population of the village is literate. The number of students in the primary school is on the increase. However, less than half the children of school age attend. There are very few students from the poor families. The use of consumer goods has increased, but few are available in Mantala. Some villagers demonstrated their awareness of the differences between the landed and the landless, but there has been no effort so far to organize politically for reducing the gap. Economic difficulties in recent times have made more villagers conscious of such differences, but they appeared to be resigned to fate and surprisingly, have become more apathetic to participation in local affairs.

The economy of Mantala is not different from most villages in Bangladesh. The income of the families has gone up, but not in real terms. There are no extra employment-generating facilities in Mantala, and migration to cities has not occurred on a large scale. The village seldom gets together, except for the two gatherings for offering Eid prayers. The attendance at the weekly Ju'ma prayers is slim. Large congregations could be observed only at the adjudication of local disputes. At one of these meetings, about twenty people were present.

Politics is not one of the principal interests of the residents of Mantala. Only about half the people I interviewed showed any concern for the political situation in the country. Of these, most expressed their desire to see the government keep the price of basic necessities down. They did not care which
political party was in power. A small section does have preference for political parties. Mantala has traditionally supported the Awami League (AL), but, according to the village leaders, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) polled the majority of votes in the last presidential election. It was reported that the workers of the BNP from other villages worked hard for the party in Mantala. There is no permanent party organization in the village. Political party organizations emerge just before the elections, and later fade away.

In the absence of permanent political party organizations in Mantala, party loyalties are overshadowed by loyalties to local groups and individuals. Political parties could be used as links to secure assistance from the government in times of need. With no such link in Mantala, people form alliances with those who are able to help them in difficult times. These helps include the granting of cultivation rights to land, employment inside or outside the village, or even small amounts of cash. Therefore, the better-off and influential families lead Mantala, regardless of the political party in power at Dhaka.

The village defence party which was to be organized with ten people in each village to "provide security" exists on paper in Mantala, but not in reality. According to both the Gram Sarkar and Union Parishad leaders, little help is available from the Bajitpur police station, and it is left entirely to the villagers to maintain everyday law and order. However, law and order is not a major problem faced by the villagers.
TRADITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Mantala was hardly affected by changes in the local government system during the colonial period. The constitution of the Ferry fund and the District Board Committees had no impact on village administration. The District and Local Boards were set up at the district and subdivision levels respectively. The first signs of decentralization were noted in the 1920s with the establishment of Union Boards. But Mantala only had its first taste of local government about a half century later, when the Basic Democracy system was introduced in 1960. Union Councils replaced the Union Boards as the primary units of local government. The neighbouring village of Dulalpur became the Union Council headquarter as the Chairman was a resident of that village. Mantala was represented by the Secretary of the Council.

Local government could now be observed in the villages. Local bodies were now being used to implement development programmes, in addition to performing other functions, such as the maintenance of law and order and the supervision of roads and schools. The villagers noticed that local people were elected to the Union Councils to participate in public affairs. After independence in 1971, Union Councils were replaced by Union Panchayats. They were later named Union Parishads. The Secretary of the Union Council who belonged to an influential family of Mantala, continued as the Secretary of the new Union Parishad. The Chairman of the Union Parishad was from the adjacent village of Dulalpur.
Frequent changes of the government in Dhaka and interruptions in ongoing projects stopped development activities in Mantala since independence. Local affairs were managed by the Secretary of the Union Parishad with the help of other village leaders. The establishment of Gram Sarkar in 1980 sought to revitalize the administration in the village. In accordance with the rules laid down by the government, the Circle Officer officially announced the constitution of Gram Sarkar in Mantala. The small number of villagers who attended the meeting agreed to select Mohammad Shamsuzzooha as the Gram Pradhan, and he submitted a list of names to be approved as other Gram Sarkar members. The Gram Pradhan also allocated portfolios among the Gram Sarkar members.

The background, experience and accomplishments of Mantala Gram Sarkar members were varied. The Gram Pradhan, Shamsuzzooha, was sixty years old and had studied up to class seven. He belonged to one of the influential families in the village. His family once owned a considerable amount of property in Mantala, but it had decreased over the years through litigation and fragmentation. He supervised hired labourers who worked on his land, and also worked as a contractor in the construction business. By owning land and not cultivating it himself, Shamsuzzooha had followers both among the landowners and the farmworkers. The landowners considered him as one of their peers because he owned land, but did not perform the "inferior"
work of cultivating it himself. The farmworkers derived benefit by cultivating his land on a sharecropping basis and thus obeyed him. Shamsuzzoha had always been a supporter of the Muslim League (ML) on religious grounds. Two years ago, his allegiance shifted to the BNP. Thanks to his family connections, he had always been involved in village politics. But he was never able to serve on elected local bodies previously. Moreover, as a result of his pro-Pakistan activities during the liberation war, Shamsuzzoha lost respect among the village leaders. The establishment of Gram Sarkar, however, gave him an opportunity to regain his position. Despite his long association with public affairs in Mantala, Shamsuzzoha had not sought election to local bodies in the past. He was selected as Gram Pradhan in 1980.

Shamsuzzoha felt that the villagers had confidence in him as a leader. He said frankly that he wanted to control the village. From previous experience, he thought this was essential for the improvement of Mantala. He presided over Gram Sarkar meetings and attended national conferences addressed by the President of Bangladesh. The supervision of Gram Sarkar was his principal task. Shamsuzzoha considered the new village institution to be fairly successful in Mantala, especially in the eradication of illiteracy and the control of population growth. He asserted that the village was his first interest, and that he would work for its welfare regardless of his political party preference. The Gram Pradhan proudly stated
that all disputes in the village had been settled locally over the last two years with the help of Gram Sarkar. The body had not been successful in the task of promoting fisheries and livestock. He attributed this failure to the short period during which Gram Sarkar operated in Mantala."

According to Shamsuzzoha, the Subdivisional Officer and the Circle Officer had come to the village in mid-1980 to explain the concept and procedures of Gram Sarkar to the villagers. The Gram Pradhan claimed that Gram Sarkar met once or twice every month, and discussed local problems. He felt that the villagers of Mantala were very responsive, and were available for helping with local projects.

Sheikh Azizur Rahman was selected as the Member-Secretary of Gram Sarkar in Mantala. He was in his mid-twenties, and was occupied in agriculture. Sheikh had more years of schooling behind him than any other Gram Sarkar member in Mantala. He had studied up to class ten. He denied allegiance to any political party. But it was well known in Mantala that Sheikh was an active member of the AL in the past, and was the Secretary of the Food Production Committee of that party in Mantala. He stated that it was safe not to owe allegiance to any political party.

Sheikh was a nephew of the Gram Pradhan, and this explained his inclusion in the Gram Sarkar in spite of his political affiliations with the AL. Sheikh was entrusted with keeping books for the body, and maintaining its files. He felt that he was selected to the Gram Sarkar because the villagers wanted him
to be in it. This coincided with his intention to serve the people. The office of the Gram Sarkar was located in the Bangla Ghar of the Sheikh's house. It was a separate room in front of the house, where male guests were usually seated. The office was in very bad shape, and could collapse at any time. Sheikh did not consider Gram Sarkar to be an improvement upon previous systems of village administration. Mantala had not changed under the new institution, although the law and order situation had definitely improved. Nothing had been accomplished in other areas.\textsuperscript{12}

Kala Miah was thirty-five years old and had attended school up to class three. He owned two acres of land and cultivated them himself. His experience in village dispute adjudication and his shifting of support from the Pakistan Democratic Party to the BNP had resulted in the villagers wanting him as a Gram Sarkar member.\textsuperscript{13} He was entrusted with the portfolio of law and order which he interpreted as informing the villagers about security measures and punishing the offenders for their wrongdoings.\textsuperscript{14}

Abdur Rashid was in his mid-sixties. He owned three acres of land which he cultivated himself. He was illiterate, and still a staunch supporter of the ML. He was an uncle of the Gram Pradhan, and this might have been the reason for his inclusion in the Gram Sarkar. The list of the members showed that Rashid was given the portfolio of food and agriculture, although he expressed his ignorance on the matter. He was selected, he felt, as a village elder and for his long
experience in village affairs. Rashid was ignorant about Gram Sarkar activities, and spoke incoherently. He accused the other village leaders of failing in their duties to improve conditions in Mantala. But his views were not taken seriously by the villagers, who considered him a clown. Rashid did not attend a single meeting of the Gram Sarkar.¹⁵

Abul Hashem was twenty-six years old and had very little education. He owned and cultivated a half acre of land. He had supported the BNP for over a year, and claimed that he joined the Gram Sarkar for the good of the village. Hashem stated that he was in charge of education, although the Gram Sarkar files showed that he was running the department of fisheries and livestock in Mantala. In Hashem's opinion, Gram Sarkar had been successful in reducing corruption in the village. He was referring to the misuse of public funds for projects through local bodies. But Gram Sarkar in Mantala had no funds that could be misused.¹⁶

Asiruddin was a cultivator in his late twenties with no education or experience in local affairs. He supported any party that came to power. He did not know when he was selected to the Gram Sarkar, and had not attended any of its meetings. In absentia, Asiruddin was put in charge of cooperatives and cooperative banks in Mantala. He felt that Gram Sarkar had failed in all areas, except for teaching the illiterate villagers to write their names.¹⁷

Suruj Miah was a landless labourer in his late forties. He, too, believed in supporting the ruling party. He was a
representative of the landless labourers in Mantala, and understood that his place in the Gram Sarkar was merely token. Suruj Miah did not know what his duties and responsibilities as a member of the village institution were, and was not interested to find out. He did not attend the Gram Sarkar meetings. He thought that the body had only succeeded in settling disputes locally, and failed in all other tasks. Suruj Miah did not know that he was in charge of communication and works in Mantala over the previous two years.18

Arifur Rahman was twenty-seven years old, had schooling up to class five, and earned his living cultivating his own land. He did not support any political party and had no idea as to why or when he was selected to the Gram Sarkar. The office files showed that Arifur was entrusted with the task of promoting education in the village. But he was not interested in becoming a leader and had not enquired about the purposes of Gram Sarkar, or how they could be fulfilled. Arifur felt that the new institution should have been abolished since it was serving no purpose.19

Mastu Miah was still unaware that he had served for two years as the Gram Sarkar member in charge of youth, sports and cultural affairs in Mantala. He was forty years old with no education, and cultivated his own three acres of land. He did not care about politics and supported any party that held power. Mastu had noticed no change in Mantala since Gram Sarkar was constituted. He attended only one meeting of the village council, and felt that the Gram Pradhan did not try hard to
accomplish the objectives of Gram Sarkar. Abdus Sabur was listed in his nickname, Chhottu Miah, in the official books of Gram Sarkar. He did not know that he was in charge of the health department of the Gram Sarkar in Mantala. Sabur expressed anger because he was not consulted by the Gram Pradhan in making decisions. This might have happened because Sabur was a small farmer with no education. Sabur considered the BNP to be a party of the military who fought for the liberation of Bangladesh. He claimed to have attended all the meetings of Gram Sarkar in Mantala.

Asia Khatoon was one of the two female members of Gram Sarkar in Mantala. The list of members indicated that she was entrusted with the responsibility of promoting cottage industries in the village. But she sold her meagre amount of property and moved with her family to Dhaka a few months after Gram Sarkar was formed. Asia could not be contacted for her comments on the village body. The position had remained vacant since her departure. The other female member, Rabeya Khatoon, no relation, was a twenty-two year old housewife. She had never been to school and had no idea about Gram Sarkar and its operations. Rabeya did not know that she was in charge of population control and family planning in Mantala.
AN OVERVIEW

_Gram Sarkar_ was established in Mantala in late 1980. Since then, only two meetings were recorded in the books. On January 20, 1981, about twenty villagers and ten _Gram Sarkar_ members gathered in a meeting to discuss the problems of illiteracy and law and order in Mantala. By the time of the next meeting on March 25, 1981, interest had waned. Only six members and two villagers were present to discuss the purchase of paddy with money provided by the government. The paddy was to be purchased at low prices after the harvest and stored. It was to be used later to help the villagers when the prices went up. It appeared that _Gram Sarkar_ had already been rendered an ineffective institution. The villagers were not informed about these meetings. Even some members were not invited to attend.

Most of the villagers were aware of the existence of _Gram Sarkar_. Some had even attended a few meetings of the _Gram Shava_. The _Gram Sarkar_ members were known to the villagers, and since Mantala is very small in size, they came across the members very frequently. Yet in times of difficulty, the villagers tended to turn to the traditional village leaders for help. The _Gram Pradhan_ was approached by some, since he was also a traditional village leader. The other members, however, were not considered reliable by the villagers. Moreover, the _Gram Sarkar_ itself was not considered helpful because it did not have the necessary financial resources. Although some villagers thought the _Gram Sarkar_ was being run efficiently, the response to the question of changes in the village had been largely
negative. Nothing, it seems, had been accomplished in Mantala through its **Gram Sarkar**. Credit can only be awarded for its role in the adjudication of local disputes and the operation of a night school for some time.

The anticipated complications in the relationship between the **Gram Sarkar** and other local government institutions could be observed in Mantala. The **Union Parishad** covering Mantala had a difficult time adjusting to the new structure of **Gram Sarkar**. The Secretary of the **Union Parishad**, who was a permanent resident of Mantala, felt that the two bodies were not being coordinated well. The **Union Parishad** leaders looked upon the new institution as an attempt to undermine the authority of the former. The control of the non-elected **Gram Sarkar** would have given the BNP a strong base in the village to counter the elected, non-BNP dominated **Union Parishads**. But the scheme was not planned well, and the personnel selected for the purpose did not have the capability and integrity to carry it out. Based on his twenty years of experience with union and village politics, the Secretary of the **Union Parishad** had concluded that the **Gram Sarkar** was not an essential institution for the villages, and it was ineffective because it was dependent on the **Union Parishad** Chairman for funds to execute various programmes. The **Gram Pradhan**, on the other hand, accused the **Union Parishad** Chairman of obstructing the functioning of **Gram Sarkar**, and preventing information and directives of the government from reaching the new village institution. This exemplifies the reluctance of leaders at the intermediate level to allow decentralization of
power to the lowest levels. The lack of trust between the leaders at these two levels works to the detriment of reform attempts in local government.

The composition of Gram Sarkar in Mantala reflected the desperation of the BNP and the government to assemble a body of permanent residents of the village. According to some prominent residents, the capable villagers did not take interest in the Gram Sarkar because it was constituted under the patronage of the BNP and was dominated by its supporters. They did not like the intervention of BNP workers from other villages in the formation of a council for Mantala. They probably also saw the development of a new set of leaders which may challenge the traditional influential families in course of time. Moreover, the traditional leaders did not want to get involved in a scheme which did not seem to be practical.

The absence of prominent factional cleavages in the village seemed to have contributed to the lack of interest in Gram Sarkar. The local leaders did not try to use the new institution as a support base to fight other factions, since there were none. The educated section of the villagers avoided it because they were residing outside the village for business and professional purposes. Thus people with no idea of local councils and no following in the village were elevated to the status of village leaders, sometimes without their own knowledge or consent. They were not informed about the procedure of Gram Sarkar, or what was expected of the members under the system.

Mantala is isolated from the country, and the Gram Pradhan
used the fact to his advantage. The government had no physical presence in the village. There were no offices of the government in Mantala. The Gram Pradhan took the liberty of choosing people who, he knew, would either be too disinterested to care about the local institution, or be under his control and would not challenge his decisions. Thus, the inducements or coercion to become members of Gram Sarkar and remain loyal to the Gram Pradhan did not come directly from the central government. Workers of the BNP from other villages worked hard to recruit supporters for the party in Mantala. The village did not have strong links with the centre and the government only had to ensure the setting up of a local government institution in Mantala.

Only the Gram Pradhan received some benefit from Gram Sarkar as it established him as the legitimate leader of Mantala. The other members did not gain anything. Most of the members did not expect the new institution to accomplish its objectives. Others were frustrated with the authoritarian manner in which the Gram Pradhan ran the Gram Sarkar, and lost interest.

Gram Sarkar in Mantala remained a body on paper which was practically useless. In contravention of the basic principles of the institution, it was run almost single-handedly by the Gram Pradhan with the help of the Member-Secretary. Although these two leaders claimed that Gram Sarkar met at least once a month, their records show only two meetings were held over the period of its existence in Mantala. At least two members were
below the stipulated age limit of twenty-five years. Most functions expected to be carried out by the Gram Sarkar have been neglected. Feeble attempts at eradicating illiteracy and controlling the growth of the population had not brought about any significant change in the village. Even the construction of an office for the Gram Sarkar could not be accomplished in two years.

Mantala remains without an effective local government system. The villagers have lost interest in participating in local affairs after their two-year experience with Gram Sarkar. The failure of the new institution to raise popular consciousness about local problems will make it even more difficult for future attempts to do so. Participation was encouraging at the beginning, but gradually dropped to a minimum. A small but capable and well-informed group had been relegated to the background either because they did not want to participate in such a scheme, or because they were deliberately excluded by the BNP supporters in the village to ensure control of the Gram Sarkar by their own partymen. Although the institution was supposed to be non-partisan, most of the Gram Sarkars in the country were dominated by followers of the BNP. In Mantala, due to the low level of political consciousness, the Gram Pradhan was able to include inept people in Gram Sarkar. This was done to recruit people to the BNP. The villagers had no role in the selection of the members. To attract people to Gram Sarkar, illiterate and incapable villagers were elevated to the status of village leaders.
The demise of Gram Sarkar did not surprise anyone in Mantala, nor were the villagers sorry. Even the staunchest supporter of the BNP admitted that Gram Sarkar had achieved far less than was desired. All round development in Mantala through the efforts of the villagers is still a distant vision.

Mantala had not been prepared adequately to run local government institutions. The lack of trust of the villagers in the local institutions, and the attempt by the Gram Pradhan to run Gram Sarkar in an authoritarian manner gradually crippled the new institution. The strategy of local government reforms followed by the BNP regime did not result in spontaneous participation from the grass roots. Rather its imposition from the top overlooked the realities and necessary preconditions. The village of Mantala could not overcome its apathy as the Gram Sarkar was introduced without preparing the ground by making the villagers aware of the possibilities of the new institution and their role in it. The problems prevailed, and the chances of tackling them through local institutions became even remote in the isolated village.
NOTES

1 From a preliminary report on the second population census of Bangladesh, 1981. Published in the weekly Bichitra, July 3, 1981.

2 The weekly Bichitra, July 3, 1981.


4 Most of the figures in the village statistics are based on an interview with the Secretary of the Union Parishad of Dulalpur union. The Secretary is a permanent resident of Mantala, and has been involved in local institutions for many years. He was interviewed on June 15, 1982.

5 One maund is equivalent to 82.3 lbs. or 37.3 kgs.

6 A specialized bank designed to serve the agriculturists.


8 The major religious festivals of the Muslims. They are celebrated twice every year based on the lunar calendar.

9 The Fund was constituted under Bengal Act VIII of 1851 and tolls were levied on roads and ferries.

10 A Committee created in 1871 to determine the rate of cess and how it was to be spent.

11 The Gram Pradhan was interviewed on June 1, 1982.

12 Sheikh Azizur Rahman was interviewed on June 13, 1982.

13 The political party has ceased to exist in Bangladesh since independence. Kala Miah claimed he had no political affiliation all these years.

14 Kala Miah was interviewed on June 10, 1982.

15 Abdur Rashid was interviewed on June 4, 1982.

16 Abul Hashem was interviewed on June 14, 1982.

17 Asiruddin was interviewed on June 8, 1982.

18 Suruj Miah was interviewed on June 9, 1982.

19 Arifur Rahman was interviewed on June 2, 1982.
Mastu Miah was interviewed on June 5, 1982.

Abdus Sabur was interviewed on June 6, 1982.

Rabeya Khatoon was interviewed on June 13, 1982.
VI. NEW LEADERSHIP AND DOMINATION: GRAM SARKAR IN COLIPUR, COMILLA

Gram Sarkar fared marginally better in Colipur in the district of Comilla. The process of mobilization has been initiated in this village, but has not progressed very far. Yet, regular interactions with other parts of the country, and a slightly more politically conscious population resulted in some optimism about the new local government institution. However, in the absence of alternative leadership and because of constant domination by the older local government institutions, Gram Sarkar was rendered ineffective in Colipur. The only sign of change was the emergence of a new set of leaders for the village. Unfortunately, the two leaders belong to the same family, and are able to dominate Colipur in cooperation with one another.

THE VILLAGE

The administrative district of Comilla is situated on the Tropic of Cancer in the south-eastern region of Bangladesh. The British East India Company created the district of Tippera in 1790.\(^1\) The Government of Pakistan changed the name of the district to Comilla in 1960. Comilla covers an area of 2594 square miles with a population of 6,880,000.\(^2\) After Dhaka, it is the second most populous district in Bangladesh. The average density of population in Comilla is 2654 persons per square
MAP 3. COMILLA DISTRICT
Agriculture is the principal occupation of most of the residents. Rice, jute, oilseeds, chillies and wheat are the major crops. Colipur is located in the western side of the district in Muradnagar police station under the Comilla Sadar (North) subdivision, about twenty-one miles west of the town of Comilla.

Colipur covers an area of 1318 acres and is inhabited by 3547 villagers, of whom 1818 are males and 1729 females living in 578 households. There are no written accounts of the origin of the village. It is assumed that the fertile lands attracted settlers, and more people came later to provide various services to the cultivators. The village has been known to exist for over three hundred years. It is a village of agriculturists and fishermen. There is a popular belief that Colipur has prospered since a Muslim faqir (a holy man) pitched his tent in the village a hundred years ago.

Initially, there was little need for a body to manage local affairs as the size of the settlement was small. Gradually, the expansion of government and the establishment of structured revenue administration resulted in frequent visits by the tax collector. At the same time, the increase in population generated the need for a formal local body for making decisions as well as facilitating the collection of revenue.

At the beginning of its rule, the British East India Company made no changes in the existing system of village government and continued to collect revenue and administer the
district with the help of officers of the local Nawab. Later, local bodies were set up to facilitate the collection of revenue and to provide services outside the urban areas. But most of the villages including Colipur were not touched by these expansions. Local and District Boards were instituted at the subdivision and district levels. The district and subdivision headquarters were both located in the town of Comilla. Communication with the town was difficult and time consuming.

Colipur is about two miles north off the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. The distance can be walked in the dry season. At other times, the trip by boat takes over an hour. The economy of the village is based on agriculture, but farming is still carried on in primitive ways. There are a few shallow tube wells, but agriculture suffers due to lack of water in the dry season. Productivity of rice is approximately thirty maunds per acre, and jute and wheat returns are about twenty and twenty-two maunds respectively. Most of the villagers think better irrigation facilities will substantially increase the productivity of these crops.

Most of the villagers cultivate their own tiny plots of land in Colipur, in addition to cultivating others' land as sharecroppers. About ten per cent are landless. Many adults of the same family share a small amount of land, and are in no better condition than the landless. Only the Bhuiya family, which owns most of the land, rents out their land for sharecropping. The tenure arrangements vary according to the bargaining capacity of the tenants. In most cases, the tenant
has to bear the costs of seed, fertilizers and other inputs, and
the crops are shared equally by the owner and the tenant. In
other cases, the cost of the input is shared equally, and a
third of the output goes to the tenant. The tenants with long
records of loyalty get to cultivate the better lands.

Due to lack of irrigation facilities and traditional
farming methods and implements, productivity is low. The
landless labourers with no alternative employment opportunities
are finding it extremely difficult to survive on these returns.
Another arrangement of tenure is to acquire cultivating rights
by paying a fixed sum of money to the landowner. The cultivator
is then entitled to retain the crop. Some lands are being
cultivated for generations by the same tenant family who have
become de facto owners. The legal owners are not even aware of
the location of the plot, and thus are satisfied with whatever
amount of return is handed over by the cultivators.

There are no small industries or other sources of
employment in Colipur. The population has increased by about
thirty per cent over the last decade. According to the Union
Parishad Chairman, nearly forty per cent of the villagers can
not work due to old age, physical handicaps and other reasons.
This figure appears to be somewhat exaggerated. By observing
the village and talking to other villagers, I got the impression
that the percentage of non-workers in Colipur is around thirty.
Another ten per cent work in the district headquarters and other
towns. The remainder of the population are engaged in
agriculture. The agricultural products are marketed at
Elliotganj, a big marketing centre on the Dhaka-Chittagong highway. There is a bank in Elliotganj which serves Colipur, but the villagers are not yet used to the banking system. Private money lending no longer appears to be common in the village.

The nearest railway station is twenty-one miles away in Comilla. The village is accessible by road from Dhaka, Chittagong and Comilla. Telegraph and telephone facilities are available at Elliotganj. Newspapers can reach Colipur from Dhaka in a few hours, but very few people read them. There are many radio receiver sets as well as a few television sets.

There were a few Hindu families serving as barbers and washermen in Colipur, but they did not return from India after the war of liberation. Their homesteads were purchased by local residents at cheap prices. At present, there are no Hindus or followers of religions other than Islam in Colipur. The social composition of the village has not changed markedly over the last few years. The rate of literacy ranges around eighteen per cent, about the same as Muradnagar thana and Comilla Sadar (North) Subdivision, but well below the district average of about 24 per cent. There are one primary school and three Madrasas (a school for teaching religious subjects and Arabic). About two hundred students attend these institutions, but a very small percentage complete their studies and go on to the high school in Elliotganj. There are no dispensaries or qualified medical practitioners in Colipur. The roads and bridges linking the village with other areas have not been properly maintained.
Some villagers have set up businesses, stores, or rice mills, and work at other jobs in Elliotganj. These people bring in consumer and luxury goods to be used in the village. Many people go out of Colipur to seek employment in the towns and cities. Thus there is a constant flow of people from the village to the towns and back. In spite of these exposures, Colipur remains highly conservative with primitive living conditions. The majority of people who earn substantial amounts of money prefer to purchase properties and live in the urban areas because of the better living conditions and educational facilities for their children. A small percentage invest in land in the village, but continue to live in the urban areas. They look at these properties as insurance against the failure of their business or the loss of a job. This uncertainty inhibits them from investing in improving living conditions in the village. Colipur does not benefit from its people earning money in the towns.

There are eleven mosques in Colipur, and regular congregations are held in each. There is a large open space designated for holding the Eid prayers. These are the biggest gatherings where the influential persons and religious leaders get a chance to address the villagers. At other times, the village leaders convene meetings in their baithak-khana. The volume of attendance varies depending on the influence of the leaders and the urgency of the issues to be discussed. The number of such meetings seems to be decreasing.
TRADITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local government began to develop in Comilla after the formation of the Union Boards under the Village Self-Government Act of 1919. Some time lapsed before the Union Boards could be formed in the remote villages. The richest and most influential man in Colipur, Rafiquddin Bhuiya, did not get involved himself. Instead, his eldest son, Ali Asgar, was nominated the Union Board President in the 1920s, and remained in the post until the late 1950s. He enjoyed effective control over the village, obviously due to his father's position in Colipur. His family owned about two-thirds of the land in and around the village. Ali Asgar faced no problem as long as Rafiquddin Bhuiya was alive, and other members of the family did not challenge him.

The partition of India in 1947 did not affect the composition of the village, since there was no prominent Hindu family in Colipur. Ali Asgar was aided by a number of small farmers in running the Union Board and managing local affairs in the village. This group of farmers received sharecropping rights to the land owned by the Bhuiyas. They were tenants of the family of Ali Asgar, and gradually acquired more land to become middle farmers. They were getting benefits out of supporting Ali Asgar, and in return, helped him in dominating the village. This relationship resulted in the continuation of the status quo, and the village has not developed institutions and leaders to take over in the changed circumstances after Bangladesh became independent in 1971.

The domination of Rafiquddin Bhuiya went unchallenged until
his death in the late 1940s. Colipur was not affected by political movements against colonial rule. Competition for power and resources was not acute. The dominant leader was able to keep the population satisfied by giving them land to be cultivated on a sharecropping basis, donating money for small local projects, and lending money to the villagers in periods of need. His death resulted in a split in the family. The homestead was divided into the Eastern and Western hishyas (sections), along with the landed property, among the sons of his two wives. There were six sons in each hishya. The homestead became fragmented, and after giving the daughters their share, the landed property became considerably smaller. In spite of these divisions, each son owned more land than most of the other villagers in Colipur. The division of the property was not accepted by all the concerned parties as fair, and court cases have continued over the last thirty years, resulting in rivalry and conflict between the Eastern and Western hishyas.

Ali Asgar assumed the leadership of Colipur. Although he served as the President of the Union Board for several years, his authority was continually challenged by the Bhuiyas from the Eastern hishya. Ali Asgar was the eldest brother in the Western hishya. Meanwhile, the Eastern hishya was trying to build up alliances with some small farmers in the village against the leadership of Ali Asgar. Their principal objective was to take back by force some of the property awarded to the Western hishya by the courts. They did not succeed, but the Eastern hishya became stronger as some of Ali Asgar's brothers were out of the
village attending the University of Dacca. After completing their education, they secured jobs in the urban areas, and visited Colipur once or twice a year. One of them later became a leader of the Awami League (AL), and was elected twice to the Provincial Assembly of East Pakistan.

Ali Asgar had to cultivate and win the loyalty of village leaders outside the family. He turned to some of his loyal supporters who had been enjoying his patronage in building up a political base in Colipur. These people saw as very valuable the Western hishya's connection with the government through the members of the family working in the towns. During the rapid growth of industries in the 1950s and 1960s, mills and factories in Dhaka, Chittagong and Khulna were employing unskilled labour. The next generation of the Bhuiyas, from both the Eastern and Western hishyas, were now entering the job market, and because of their education, held good positions. They were able to create a wide network for arranging job opportunities for the rural poor of Colipur. These opportunities did not last long. Since the Western hishya Bhuiyas went out to the towns first, they were able to provide more jobs.

The Bhuiyas continued to prosper outside Colipur, and were able to help some villagers by providing them with jobs in the cities. But the physical absence of this generation from the village resulted in the beginning of the erosion of control. Nevertheless, Ali Asgar still commanded respect as the eldest brother, and won over the support of the local people by renting out his own as well as his brothers' land to his followers for
cultivation. He decided on behalf of his brothers who was to get their lands.

The death of Ali Asgar in 1973, the absentee status of the landowning Bhuiyas, and the increased importance of local bodies after the independence of Bangladesh made the villagers conscious of the need for local leaders. AL relief committees were set up in many villages to distribute relief materials, and the residents of Colipur thought their village needed government assistance, which only capable leaders could acquire. By this time, only one brother was living permanently in the village in each of the hishyas. Mahtabuddin, a former businessman from the Western hishya and Zahed Ali, a retired schoolmaster from the Eastern hishya, were both too old and disinclined to provide local leadership. Meanwhile, some followers of Ali Asgar had established themselves as intermediate leaders in communicating grievances of the villagers to the Bhuiyas and sometimes succeeded in getting results. They had also improved their economic conditions through the urban connections.

One middle farmer family, the Sarkars, gained considerable influence over this period. The family acquired wealth by operating business establishments in Elliotganj, and subsequently purchased more land in Colipur. The Sarkars had links with the AL, and later the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). Gradually, the family gained the status of village leaders. The Chairman of the Paharpur (South) Union Parishad under which Colipur was included, was elected with the support of Ali Asgar in 1960. The Chairman, Mozammel Hossain Sarkar,
was a permanent resident of Colipur, and had acquired considerable influence over the next ten years. The villagers accepted him as a leader since he had become the most influential man. Even today, he continues to maintain his links with the Western hishya, and along with his brother, recommends cultivators for sharecropping to the members of the Bhuiya family living in the urban areas. Thus the two brothers from the Sarkar Bari have emerged as leaders in Colipur, and provided leadership in the Union Parishad and Gram Sarkar without being challenged by others. The alliance of these leaders with the Western hishya made them formidable in the village, and their links with the AL made them even stronger.

National politics has not had a major impact on Colipur. The villagers are primarily concerned with situations prevailing in Colipur, especially the high prices of essential commodities, and also facilities for cultivation and communication. A small percentage expressed their support for political parties. The AL has always been very strong here, and a brother of Ali Asgar, Hafizuddin Ahmed, was elected to the Provincial Assembly of East Pakistan in 1954 and 1970 on the party's ticket. The present leadership of the Gram Sarkar worked for the BNP in the presidential election of 1981 because they got disillusioned with the AL. The BNP wanted the leaders to work for the party, and they thought it would be wise to be on the government's side. But inter-party conflict has been kept to a minimum in Colipur. There are no government offices, not even a post office in the village. The political parties have not set up
permanently offices. Only during elections, the local followers and workers from other villages gather to hold meetings and woo voters. But they have not been effective because local alliances determine the voting patterns. The personal images, followings and alliances of local candidates are the key factors in their election. Thus local politics and elections have been conducted on lines completely unlike those at the national level.

SWANIRVAR GRAM SARKAR

Like most other villages in the area, Colipur felt no impact of the changes in local government during the British rule. The creation of the Union Boards in the 1920s provided the first, albeit limited, opportunity for local leaders to participate in public affairs. The next major change came with the Basic Democracies elections held in 1960. For the first time, villagers from outside the dominant families were elected to represent Colipur in the Union Council. In 1980, the Government of Bangladesh sought to bring about another important change by creating a local government unit in the village. The Circle Officer of Muradnagar thana announced the formation of Gram Sarkar in Colipur in a meeting attended by the villagers and the Union Parishad members. Taher Hossain Sarkar, brother of the Union Parishad Chairman, was selected as the Gram Pradhan. He submitted a list of people to be selected as Gram Sarkar.
members, and they were accepted by the Gram Shava. Many of the nominated members were not present at this meeting.

The members of Gram Sarkar in Colipur have not maintained records of its constitution and operation. I have had to draw these out from the recollections and opinions of Gram Sarkar members on the origin and operation of the new institution in the village. These will also help in assessing the extent of success or failure in the performance of their duties. The Gram Sarkar leaders were interviewed with the intention of explaining the fate of the institution in Colipur. As can be seen in the following summaries of their background and experience, they consist of a variety of people with widely different levels of capability.

Taher Hossain Sarkar was selected as the Gram Pradhan, thanks to the influence of his brother, the Union Parishad Chairman. Taher was sixty-five years old, and called himself a non-Matric. He was a businessman and owned rice and oil mills in Elliotganj. He had been involved in local affairs for a long time and was the commander of the local guards during the British and Pakistani periods. Later, Taher joined government service, but subsequently came back to the village. He was an active member of the AL and served as the Chairman of the Sangram Committee during the liberation war. After independence, he became a member of the Relief Committee in the area.

Taher said that he shifted his support to the BNP after he became the Gram Pradhan. He did not face any pressure from the
party in selecting Gram Sarkar members. He thought he was selected as the Gram Pradhan because the villagers wanted him to lead and develop Colipur. His job as Gram Pradhan was to convene meetings and adjudicate disputes. He had attended meetings and conferences in other villages, towns and the capital. But he demonstrated total disregard for the basic procedures of organizing Gram Sarkar, such as allocating specific responsibilities to the members and convening regular meetings. He could not name the different Gram Sarkar members holding the various portfolios.

Taher claimed that he had worked hard to improve living conditions in Colipur, and that most villagers appreciated his efforts. A "handful" did not like his leadership and disobeyed his decisions. He thought Gram Sarkar had been fairly successful in Colipur, and said that over fifty villagers attended the bi-weekly meetings of the council. He stated that many people wanted to join Gram Sarkar, but only the honest villagers had been included. Taher admitted that his control over local people was gradually decreasing. He stated that the BNP and Zia had benefitted from Gram Sarkar, but cited the honest policy of the BNP as his reason for joining the party. Although he claimed that everything had been going according to plan in Colipur, he could only name canal digging and a night school as the accomplishments of Gram Sarkar in the village. He said that much could not be done due to lack of funds.

Taher had established himself as a leader in the village. His link with the BNP and his fairly successful business career
were considered useful assets by the villagers. His close contacts with the Union Parishad members and his brother's influence as its Chairman had added to his status. The lack of other strong candidates for the position of Gram Pradhan also made Taher an unanimous choice. His alliance with the Bhuiyas put him at an advantage over others. But his success as a leader is open to question. Gram Sarkar in Colipur did not have an office of its own, portfolios were not allocated among the members, and the objectives of Gram Sarkar had not been understood by the members or the villagers.

Mohammad Bazlur Rahman was the Member-Secretary of Gram Sarkar in Colipur. He was thirty-two years old and taught at a high school in Elliotganj. Bazlur held bachelor degrees in Commerce and Education, and was the most educated permanent resident of Colipur. He owned some plots of land which were rented out for cultivation. He claimed that he was politically neutral when he served on the Gram Sarkar, although he was an active supporter of the AL and had not formally left the party. He thought he was selected over others because the villagers considered him to be an enthusiastic and educated worker, and a good leader. He accepted the position because he believed that the village could be developed by cooperating with the government.  

Bazlur admitted that Gram Sarkar had failed in Colipur. The government did not live up to its promises of helping the village organization in all respects. Only adult education projects were tried, but they failed due to lack of funds for
arranging lights, blackboards and remuneration of teachers. Bazlur thought Gram Sarkar had not been able to develop local leadership. He pointed out high unemployment as the most serious problem in Colipur. He did not find it difficult to work with the BNP-dominated Gram Sarkar, and felt that village based planning was essential to solve local problems.

Bazlur found fault with the formation of Gram Sarkar in Colipur. The villagers were not properly informed of the meeting to be held for this purpose. The Union Parishad Chairman made a list of members. Nobody objected and the members were selected. However, Bazlur made no attempt to protest because he knew that the influential Gram Pradhan, with the help of the Union Parishad Chairman, would have the people he wanted on the Gram Sarkar. The meetings were not held regularly, and the proceedings were not recorded or filed. They were waiting for the system to operate on a full scale before recording them. In occasional meetings local problems were discussed by the few people present, but no concrete programmes could be adopted.

The other Gram Sarkar members in Colipur had widely different opinions on these matters. Alfu Mia was thirty-five years old, and had read up to class seven. He owned a grocery store in Elliotganj, and a sizeable amount of land which was rented out for cultivation. He thought he was selected to Gram Sarkar since he was powerful. He always supported the party in power because getting elected was proof that the party was right and popular. The village could benefit only by following the
governing party. The government would aid in the development of a village only when it received support. Alfu did not attend all Gram Sarkar meetings but stated that a large number of people were present at the meetings.

Abdul Majid Majhi was thirty years old and has attended school up to class seven. He supported the National Awami Party (pro-Moscow) until 1975. Since the party had no chance of getting into office, Majhi shifted his support to the BNP which was in power in 1979. He came to know about his selection to the Gram Sarkar about two months after his name was approved. Surprisingly, he claimed that he had attended all the meetings of Gram Sarkar and thought that the system could solve most of the problems of Colipur.

Sabdar Ali Sarkar was seventy years old, had hearing problems and did not want to travel outside his village. He attended school up to class eight and made a living cultivating his own land. At present his sons till the fields and he helps them. Sabdar supported the AL until 1974, but claimed to be neutral when he was interviewed. He thought the government officials should tell the villagers how to solve their problems. Sabdar did not demonstrate any understanding or interest in village self-government. He was probably selected as a member since he supported the Gram Pradhan. He stated repeatedly that Gram Sarkar was never put into operation in Colipur, and he did not attend any of the meetings.

Forty-five year old Chand Mia was an illiterate farmer and was apparently selected to the Gram Sarkar to represent the
southern areas of Colipur. He was previously a supporter of the AL, but started supporting the BNP after the establishment of Gram Sarkar. He knew only two other members, and accepted membership to the body because the other two did. He attended only one meeting which was attended by seven or eight people. Chand thought that the main obstacle to the success of Gram Sarkar in Colipur was the divergence of views among the council members and the villagers.

Kadam Ali Bepari was sixty years old, cultivated his meagre amount of land and rowed boats. He had no education, and shifted his allegiance from the AL to the BNP because everybody else did. He believed that Gram Sarkar could be useful to the village, but it was not properly run. He attended a couple of meetings, but complained that the Gram Pradhan did not listen to the views of others. Kadam felt that Gram Sarkar could be eliminated, and that the Union Parishad would still be able to provide guidance to the villagers.

Joynal Hoq was over fifty years old and cultivated his own land. He left the AL after the death of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975. The party became corrupt, and since the other village leaders joined the BNP, Joynal followed them. He felt that he was selected because he was honest and capable. He attended five meetings, and thought that he missed only one. Joynal Hoq worked for the BNP during elections. He felt that Gram Sarkar in Colipur did not get enough time to accomplish its objectives.

Mansur Ahmad was forty-five years old and had read up to class five. He rented his own land out for cultivation and
worked as a contractor's assistant in the construction business. He supported the BNP because he had always supported the governing party. The villagers wanted him as a Gram Sarkar member because he was a good worker. The decision was not wise. Mansur was frequently out of the village, working at his job. He could not attend any meeting over the two year period of Gram Sarkar in Colipur. He did not know other members, but felt that the members should all be selected from the government party supporters to secure cooperation based on similar outlooks and interests.

Maksud Ali Khalifa was sixty-five years old and had attended school for a few years. He was extremely passive in village activities and was made a member of the Gram Sarkar without his knowledge or consent. He attended a meeting of Gram Sarkar accidentally because he happened to visit the Union Parishad office at the time for some other purpose. Khalifa had no idea about the objectives and operation of Gram Sarkar, and had done nothing as its member. His inclusion appears to be an attempt to have a representative from the south-eastern border of the village, as well as to have a disinterested member who would not challenge the Gram Pradhan. Khalifa felt that Gram Sarkar could be eliminated without fear of adverse consequences in the village.

Jobeda Khatun, a fifty year old housewife, did not understand most of the questions I asked. She was selected to the Gram Sarkar because she was a female with five years of schooling, which is rare in Colipur. She seemed to think that
the only purpose of local government reforms and Gram Sarkar was the expansion of mass literacy. Anowara Begum, another housewife aged twenty-five, had a similar level of education and was expected to develop cottage industries in Colipur on behalf of Gram Sarkar. She attended some meetings, but did not speak about local problems on those occasions. She had complete faith in the Gram Pradhan, and had initialled papers sent by him without reading them.

AN OVERVIEW

Gram Sarkar was constituted in Colipur in 1980. Since no records were maintained, it is difficult to point out any accomplishments of the institution in the village, or even its intentions and plans. According to the members and the Gram Pradhan, the number of meetings varied from one in two years to one every week. Not only the villagers, but most of the members were not informed about and invited to these meetings. The villagers did not care to find out about the time and place of these meetings, nor of their consequences.

The villagers were aware of the existence of Gram Sarkar in Colipur. Many villagers said they went to at least one meeting of the village body. About half of the residents said they knew the members, a few knew only the Gram Pradhan. Yet they did not go to the members or the Gram Pradhan in times of need. Most of the people turned to the traditional leaders and the Union
Parishad members. Due to his connections with these leaders, the Gram Pradhan was sometimes consulted. Two villagers complained that they did not receive help when they approached the Gram Sarkar. The local people had witnessed no change in Colipur since the creation of Gram Sarkar, and most thought the institution was not being properly run. Even the members could not cite instances of achievements. Gram Sarkar seems to have failed completely in Colipur.

The dominant presence of the Chairman and three members of the Union Parishad in the village had contributed to the weakness of the Gram Sarkar. The Chairman was a permanent resident, and was well known among the villagers. He had demonstrated his links with the government and an ability to secure funds for local projects. He had acquired a large following with these activities. The central government had no direct presence in the village, but exerted its role through the local leaders and public officials in the region. The leaders at the union level could secure funds for local projects if they had close links with the government officials. Nevertheless, the short life span of Gram Sarkar had further undermined the influence of its leaders. Due to the lack of confidence of the villagers and non-performance of their duties by the Gram Sarkar, many of my informants among the villagers including two Union Parishad members, suggested that Gram Sarkar should be eliminated. The continuation of two rival institutions performing more or less the same type of functions, sometimes with overlapping jurisdictions, would only result in conflicts.
They preferred the experienced and somewhat successful Union Parishad over the unsuccessful Gram Sarkar.

Factional groupings in Colipur were no longer clearly defined. In the past, the two sections of the Bhuiya family had led factions and the villagers were loyal to one or the other. The emergence of a new leading family, the Sarkars, and the decline of the Bhuiyas had led to a change in all previous alignments. The new leaders were not facing strong challenges from their opponents. Most of the villagers had accepted the new leaders. The stronger faction had succeeded in dominating local government institutions in Colipur. Unequal strength of the factions had hindered the prospect of developing an alternate set of leaders.

The composition of Gram Sarkar in Colipur demonstrated the lack of interest of the villagers in local affairs. Totally disinterested people were included without their knowledge or consent. The Union Parishad Chairman made up a list of members, instead of the villagers selecting them. The landless and the fishermen were not included, and decisions were made by the Gram Pradhan without consulting the members. They were not given specific responsibilities, and the Gram Pradhan demonstrated no intention of organizing them. An office could not be set up during the two years of Gram Sarkar's existence. The Union Parishad office was used for occasional gatherings. The members were incapable of comprehending their position and roles in the system. They complained that these were not explained to them by the Gram Pradhan or the government officials. Most of the
members expressed their preference to be guided and instructed by the government officials.

It is obvious that some Gram Sarkar members in Colipur were induced to join by the Union Parishad Chairman who was a leader of both the businessmen and the agriculturists. They appeared keen to please the new leaders of the village and allowed the Gram Pradhan to dominate Gram Sarkar. Their reward was probably recognition as village leaders which would make it easy for them to acquire more power in the future. Other Gram Sarkar members were not interested or active and this helped the Gram Pradhan to exercise control over the new institution.

Gram Sarkar in Colipur did nothing to make the villagers useful participants in local affairs. Meetings were not announced or publicized. The villagers did not care to find out. The office of the Gram Sarkar was dominated by the Gram Pradhan. No records of the organization's activities were maintained. It is clear that Gram Sarkar could not accomplish any of the objectives for which it was created. The only attempt at adult literacy was half-hearted and had to be discontinued. All the members could not be brought together for a meeting at which portfolios and tasks could be distributed among them.

The chances of a revival of interest in local affairs have decreased in Colipur. The village suffered because there was no attempt to explain the objectives and strategies of Gram Sarkar to the villagers by the leaders and the government. The dominant positions of the Union Parishad Chairman and Gram
Pradhan nullified the basic aim of Gram Sarkar, which was to be a body representative of all groups and interests. The level of participation became low, especially after members were selected in absentia, while those who were present and showed interest were overlooked. The BNP sought to utilize the Gram Sarkar and instructed its members to work for the party's candidates in the elections. In Colipur, which traditionally supported the AL, Gram Sarkar was the only base that could be used by the BNP.

Gram Sarkar ceased to operate in Colipur by the end of 1981. The villagers lost interest, and the leaders realized their helplessness. Both groups lost faith in developing the village through the cooperative efforts of the villagers coordinated by the Gram Sarkar. Local government could not be reformed by creating an institution without educating the villagers and making them aware of their roles and responsibilities. The process of preparing Colipur to run local government institutions had not been completed. The conflict within the leading family has helped the development of new leaders, but the village as a whole lacked the preparation required to receive power. Leaders at the union level used their advantageous position in Colipur to assume control of the new institution. Gram Sarkar in Colipur proved itself incapable of planning and executing even small projects. It was not equipped to bring about major changes, since the people selected arbitrarily by a dominant personality to lead the village had no idea about their duties and responsibilities.
NOTES


5 A title conferred on people of wealth. There were a few Nawabs in the district at the time.


7 A separate room usually located in front of the homestead. Male visitors are seated and the head of the household meets other villagers in the "baithak-khana". Other terms are used in some other districts.

8 A title conferred on, or assumed by, owners of large amounts of land. In this case, it seems to have been assumed by a family.

9 "Sarkar Bari" means the "house of the Sarkars". Sarkar is a title conferred on, or assumed by, people who maintain accounts for others.

10 The term was used to describe people who sat for Matriculation final examinations after ten years of schooling, but failed. Taher Hossain Sarkar was interviewed at the Union Parishad office in Colipur on May 2, 1982.

11 A committee set up to help the liberation war in 1971. Such bodies existed in almost every village of Bangladesh.

12 Bazlur Rahman was interviewed on May 4, 1982 at Elliotganj High School.

13 Alfu Mia was interviewed on May 9, 1982 in his store in Elliotganj bazar.

14 "Majhi" means a person who rows a boat. But the occupation of this member's family is agriculture. Abdul Majid Majhi was interviewed on May 10, 1982.

15 Sabdar Ali Sarkar was interviewed on April 22, 1982.
16 Chand Mia was interviewed on April 26, 1982.

17 "Bepari" is a title used by traders. Kadam Ali Bepari was interviewed on April 23, 1982.

18 Joynal Hoq was interviewed on April 30, 1982.

19 Mansur Ahmad was interviewed in Comilla town on July 25, 1982.

20 "Khalifa" means a tailor. Maksud Ali Khalifa still does some tailoring, but the major portion of his earnings comes from the land he owns. He was interviewed on May 6, 1982.

21 Jobeda Khatun was interviewed on April 26, 1982. Her son and a neighbour helped her in answering questions.

22 Anowara Begum was interviewed on April 29, 1982.

23 Two Union Parishad members, Mohammad Jamal Mia and Ezazuddin were interviewed on April 23 and 24, 1982. Both claimed that they were automatically selected as Gram Sarkar members due to their Union Parishad membership. It was later found that they were not Gram Sarkar members. Even the villagers did not know that the Union Parishad members were to be excluded from Gram Sarkar membership.
VII. FACTIONALISM AND VILLAGE LEADERSHIP: GRAM SARKAR IN RAINAGAR, RAJSHAHI

The village of Rainagar seemed to be well-prepared for implementing changes in the system of local government. A considerable degree of urban influence has facilitated the mobilization of Rainagar and contributed to its preparedness to establish and operate new local government institutions. But the attempt by the central government to install its supporters as village leaders and stiff opposition from a stronger rival faction created obstacles in the way of reforms in local government. Strong factionalism affected the performance of Gram Sarkar. However, the accomplishments of Gram Sarkar demonstrate the importance of preparation for local government reforms to be successful.

The district of Rajshahi is situated in the north-western region of Bangladesh. Prior to the takeover of the district by the British East India Company, Rajshahi formed a private estate of the Raja of Natore. The British did not bring about any major change in the administrative machinery.¹ The boundaries of the district underwent changes over the years as the British reorganized administration in the subcontinent.² More reorganization took place later when India was partitioned in 1947.
MAP 4. RAJSHAHI DISTRICT
THE VILLAGE

Rajshahi District covers an area of 3,652 square miles and is inhabited by 5,263,000 people. On average, 1,754 persons live in a square mile, with 0.36 acre of land per person. Rajshahi is essentially an agricultural district and more than 79 per cent of its population are directly dependent on agriculture for their livelihood. Rice, jute, sugar cane and wheat are the principal crops. The village Rainagar is situated in the south-western part of the district under Paba police station of Rajshahi Sadar subdivision.

Rainagar is a relatively large village covering an area of 3078 acres with a population of 3042, of which 1,547 are males and 1,495 females. There are 557 households and the rate of literacy was 13 per cent in 1976. There is one government free primary school and one madrasa in Rainagar, and other educational institutions are located in its vicinity. The village leaders claim that the rate of literacy now stands near thirty-five per cent.

Rainagar lies just outside the boundary of Rajshahi town, and because of its proximity to the town, has acquired many urban characteristics. Due to the sandy soil condition and the demand for various types of services by the semi-urban community that inhabits Rainagar, agriculture is not the principal means of livelihood here. Instead, a number of other occupations including service in the educational institutions in the vicinity and business have become prominent.

Rainagar is located about three miles east of Rajshahi
town, on the highway to Dhaka. It extends up to the river Padma in the south. Like most suburbs, Rainagar provides a cheap residential area for those of its inhabitants who work in the town and in local small industries. The establishment of the University of Rajshahi in 1954-55, the Rajshahi Medical College in 1958, and the Rajshahi Engineering College in 1964 contributed to some changes in the social composition of Rainagar. The village began to be inhabited not only by the permanent residents, but also by employees of these institutions and students. The villagers also had the opportunity to find employment in the University and colleges. A number of contractors who were supervising the construction of new buildings for these institutions were attracted to the area. Thus, Rainagar gradually became the residence of people of various professions with different interests.

The University of Rajshahi is situated across the highway from the village, and the Engineering College, Medical College, the radio broadcasting station, and two jute and sugar mills are only a few miles away. The consequence is that Rainagar looks different from most other villages of Bangladesh. The village is not composed mostly of agricultural land, although some cultivation is done on land that periodically emerges from the river Padma. About 25 per cent of the villagers pursue agriculture as an occupation. Sugar cane, rice and jute are the principal crops. The productivity is low; the yield for rice per acre is 24 maunds and for jute, 15 maunds. For sugar cane, the yield is much higher, ranging around 800 maunds per acre.
Approximately 15 per cent of the population is employed in small industries which include weaving and bamboowork. Products of both agriculture and small industries are marketed at Rajshahi town and other bazaars in the neighbourhood.

About 30 per cent of the residents of Rainagar work in Rajshahi town. Another substantial section are employed in the educational institutions situated close to the village. The percentage of non-workers and unemployables including the handicapped, elderly and children is approximately 20. 85 per cent of the population of Rainagar are Muslims, and the remaining 15 per cent are Hindus. There are three mosques and one temple for these two religious groups. There are no metalled or concrete roads in the village. Electricity and telephone connections, however, have been provided to Rainagar. There is a Post Office and three branches of the Sonali, the Rupali and Agrani Banks serving the villagers. Real estate value has gone up considerably over the past ten years as more people working in the vicinity try to acquire property in the village.

The permanent residents of Rainagar started to take advantage of the developments near the village. As the colleges and university buildings were being constructed, they provided employment opportunities for local unskilled workers. They were appointed by the people who had contracts for the construction jobs, and thus the local contractors gained influence by providing these benefits to the villagers. More jobs were available after the first phase of construction was completed,
and the institutions started operating. The contractors exercised their connections and influence at these institutions to distribute jobs to their followers. They were also able to patronise small businesses by the villagers who set up stores on the premises of these institutions.

The most successful among these contractors was Fazlur Rahman, a resident of Rainagar in his late forties. He was a supporter of the National Awami Party [pro-Moscow] (NAP-M) from the days when he attended college in Rajshahi. With the support of other contractors and local people who received help from him in acquiring jobs and setting up small stores, and thanks to his initiatives in solving local problems, Fazlur Rahman soon established himself as a leader in Rainagar. His family has always been prominent in the village. He has a good number of relatives in Rainagar who follow him. Therefore, he did not face any competition within the village when he contested for the Chairmanship of the Shamla Union Council in the 1960s. Fazlur Rahman easily defeated the candidates from other villages and remained Union Council Chairman for several years, and after the independence of Bangladesh, continued as Chairman of the Union Parishad until 1977.

Fazlur Rahman was able to maintain his leading position in the village because he was wealthy, and had close contacts with government officials as well as the communities around the village. His allegiance to the NAP-M was not considered a threat to the Awami League (AL) which formed the first government of Bangladesh. The NAP-M supported most of the
policies pursued by the AL. The AL did not consider it necessary to develop alternate leadership for the area as it looked upon the NAP-M as an ally.

Gradually, Rainagar started acquiring the characteristics of a small town. Houses were being constructed and rented out to people from outside the village. As indicated, the composition of the village changed and there was a rise in literacy. Agriculture became less important, and services with government and private organizations and independent business enterprises were being taken up by more villagers. They were aware of opportunities and resources that existed outside Rainagar. As a result, the competition for maintaining control over the village did not become acute.

However, there were other educated villagers who aspired to political prominence, but were not able to successfully challenge Fazlur Rahman. The fall of the AL government in 1975 followed by the formation of a new political party by Ziaur Rahman provided an opportunity for these people. The scope of rising to prominence through the new political party was made convenient with the government's intended scheme of establishing Gram Sarkar. The Gram Pradhan and other members of the new council were to be selected in a meeting of the villagers. Once the Gram Pradhan was able to pick members of his choice, it would be easy for him to lure them into working for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). With the backing of the ruling political party, these people could put up a strong opposition to the dominant leader of Rainagar, Fazlur Rahman.
Some of the villagers who were eager to challenge Fazlur Rahman campaigned hard during the Union Parishad elections of 1977 in which Fazlur Rahman lost the Chairmanship to Mansur Islam, a resident of an adjacent village.

One of these challengers was Ali Ansar, holder of two Master degrees in Political Science and Psychology. Before the independence of Bangladesh, he was a lecturer in Dhaneswar College, about 20 miles from Rainagar. Ali Ansar was an active supporter of the AL. After independence, he became the Principal of a college in Kalakhali. At the end of the AL regime, Ali Ansar lost his job and was charged with corruption. He was fined and jailed after conviction. After his release, he worked as the Principal of another college in Ratanpur in Rajshahi for a couple of years. He was again accused of misappropriating college funds and was fired. He manipulated an appointment for himself as a Section Officer in the University of Rajshahi, but the appointment was later declared illegal.

All through his career, Ali Ansar kept in touch with the villagers and visited Rainagar frequently. Finding it difficult to secure employment with his past record, he returned to Rainagar in 1979-80, and joined the BNP. Meanwhile, Fazlur Rahman had lost some influence with the fall of the AL. Ali Ansar expressed support for the new regime and its political party, the BNP. By the time Gram Sarkar was established in 1980, Ali Ansar was able to win enough followers to be installed as the Gram Pradhan of Rainagar.
TRADITION OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT

In the pre-Mughal period, the village headman in the area had to collect one-sixth of the agricultural produce and pay the amount as rent to the Zamindar. The British assumed control of the district in 1765. The traditional local administrative system continued, until the first Local Boards were instituted. In 1916, there were three Local Boards at the subdivisional headquarters of Rampur-Boalia, Natore and Naogaon. These bodies managed village roads, pounds, primary education and water supply in rural areas. But the villages remained isolated from the Local Boards which had their offices in the urban areas. Rainagar was located adjacent to the Municipality of Rampur-Boalia established in 1876. It later became the Municipality of Rajshahi. This arrangement continued until the birth of Pakistan in 1947. Rajshahi became a district of East Pakistan, but no changes were made in the local government system in the villages.

When Basic Democracy was put into operation in 1959, Rainagar was still a village with no local institutions. But the population was increasing, and there were demands for more services and a clear need for developmental work. The village fell under Shamla union, as it was outside the boundary of Rajshahi Municipality. Shamla union had a population of 17,612 in 1976. The Union Council assumed charge of administration in the villages, and implemented a few agricultural and developmental projects. The leaders of the Union Council, its Chairman and the members, provided leadership to their
respective villages in settling disputes, arranging funds for local projects, and in maintaining links between the villagers and the government officials in the urban areas. Rainagar did not benefit immensely from these activities, and very little was accomplished in the village in the following years by the local government institutions.

SWANIRVAR GRAM SARKAR

Gram Sarkar was instituted in Rainagar in June, 1980, in the presence of the villagers and government officials. At the same meeting, eleven people were selected as Gram Sarkar members and entrusted with specific responsibilities. Many of the details about the formation and operation of Gram Sarkar in Rainagar are not accessible. The records were kept at the house of the Gram Pradhan, Ali Ansar. He was under detention when I conducted my investigation in May, 1982. Ali Ansar was arrested on charges of corruption after the military took over power from the BNP in 1982. It was not possible to interview the Gram Pradhan and analyze his views on the operation and success or failure of Gram Sarkar in Rainagar.

From the statements of his colleagues and of Rainagar villagers, the following account of Gram Sarkar can be reconstructed. Ali Ansar was a supporter of the BNP and had close contacts with its leaders at the district and national levels. He attended some meetings and conferences as Gram
Pradhan at the capital, Dhaka. Most of the Gram Sarkar members considered him to be a good leader who was capable of dealing with local problems. However, when Martial Law was declared in March, 1982, Ali Ansar was accused of giving less than the scheduled amount of wheat to the village poor and then selling the rest of the relief materials. His followers said that the Gram Pradhan reduced the amount to be given to each individual so that more people could be awarded relief.¹²

The recollections of the Gram Sarkar members form the principal basis for understanding the nature and operation of the council in Rainagar. Their views, along with those of the villagers, will be used in assessing the success or failure in the performance of their duties as members of a village-based unit endeavouring to solve problems through local planning and projects.

Mohammad Rashidul Hoq was selected Member-Secretary of Gram Sarkar in Rainagar. He was a thirty-four year old commerce graduate, and worked as an Accounts Assistant in Rajshahi Sugar Mills, a few miles from the village. Rashidul did not own cultivable land. He became a supporter of the BNP when the Gram Sarkar Committee was being formed, and could not state any specific reason as to why he became a supporter of the party.¹³ He joined Gram Sarkar because he wanted to utilize his spare time in community activities. The main task of Rashidul as Member-Secretary was to help the Gram Pradhan in arranging meetings which were held twice every week.

Rashidul considered Gram Sarkar to be extremely useful, and
pointed out improvements of local roads as an example of its success. He found very little was accomplished in the field of pisciculture. Rashidul admitted that he had no contacts with the Gram Sarkar officials, but quoted the Gram Pradhan who said that officials had been cooperating with Gram Sarkar in Rainagar. It appears that the Gram Pradhan selected a Member-Secretary who was very dependent on him. Rashidul complained that the government did not delegate power to the Gram Sarkar, and thus the institution was controlled by influential people in the village. For this reason, Gram Sarkar could not accomplish most of its objectives in Rainagar.

Naresh Chandra Sarkar was the only Hindu member of Gram Sarkar in Rainagar. He was a forty-three year old businessman, and ran a jewelry store in Rajshahi town. He had read up to class nine, and had participated in social and cultural activities with a local club. Sarkar denied political inclinations of any kind and refused to discuss politics. He stated that he could not detect any tension or rivalry among Gram Sarkar members, and thought political partisanship was irrelevant at this level. Sarkar was in charge of agriculture and forestry development in Rainagar. He stated that his job as Gram Sarkar member was to distribute materials provided by the government for better cultivation of land, but complained that the government supplies were inadequate and irregular.

Mohammad Kamrul Alam was thirty-five years old, and worked as a clerk in the University of Rajshahi. He had passed the Higher Secondary Certificate examination. Previously, Alam
supported the AL. He joined the BNP in 1980. He was a strong supporter of Ziaur Rahman and the BNP's Nineteen-Point programme. Alam was in charge of law and order in Rainagar. He claimed that Gram Sarkar had been successful in reducing the incidence of quarrels and violence in the village. About two-thirds of the time spent in the two weekly meetings were used in adjudicating local disputes. Alam thought that he was selected because the villagers wanted an honest and educated man. He was enthusiastic about Gram Sarkar and thought it represented the best strategy for local development. Yet, he resigned from the council on November 21, 1981 because of his preoccupations with his family and job. He did not have the time to spare for Gram Sarkar.

Mohammad Nasir Ali was thirty-four years old and a commerce graduate. He worked at Rajshahi Jute Mills and also owned and operated a furniture store. Nasir was a freedom fighter during the liberation war in 1971, supported the AL, and was the Chairman of the local Relief Committee after independence. He left the party after 1975, and took a liking to the BNP when it was formed. Nasir joined the Gram Sarkar because he wanted to improve conditions in the village. He was given the responsibility of organizing village cooperatives and cooperative banks in Rainagar. He regretted the fact that the government was supposed to arrange for the training of Gram Sarkar members to organize cooperative activities, but nothing materialized. Nasir attended most of the meetings of Gram Sarkar and said that the body had only succeeded in improving
roads in the village. He believed that with adequate time and proper implementation of programmes, Gram Sarkar would have been able to solve most of the problems in Rainagar. However, in his view, only if wealthy and educated villagers got involved will it be a success.

Mohammad Bazlur Rahman was a cousin of Fazlur Rahman. He was thirty-nine years old, and worked at the University of Rajshahi as a clerk. He was a commerce graduate and owned two bighas of land. He was an active member of the local club in Rainagar, and was on the BNP Committee in Rainagar in 1981. Bazlur was not present at the meeting which selected him as a member of Gram Sarkar. His duty included the organization and expansion of mass education. In his opinion, Rainagar's Gram Sarkar included some dishonest people. It seems that since he was related to Fazlur Rahman, the Gram Pradhan did not trust him. Bazlur only attended a few of the Gram Sarkar meetings and had little knowledge of the institution's activities in Rainagar.

Mohammad Matiur Rahman was a thirty-eight year old businessman. He owned a sawmill, and no agricultural land. He was a member of the AL, but was later attracted by the personality of Ziaur Rahman. Matiur became a member of the BNP youth wing in 1980. He described his job as a Gram Sarkar member as involving the care of landless farmers and the distribution of khas lands among them. Matiur thought Gram Sarkar had succeeded in improving the law and order situation, in roadbuilding and in administration in Rainagar. Cottage
industries were the least successful as very little time was available to initiate programmes. Matiur attended all the meetings of Gram Sarkar which were held twice every week.

Mohammad Jalaluddin was forty-three years old. He was a matriculate with no land of his own. He served in the Accounts Section at the University of Rajshahi. He supported the AL until 1975, but left the party due to the "misdeeds" of its leaders. He joined the Gram Sarkar with the intention of serving the villagers. He was entrusted with the portfolio of rural development and health. Jalaluddin found many irregularities within Gram Sarkar and stated that nothing worth mentioning had been accomplished in Rainagar by this institution. He thought the Union Parishad should get credit for improving the roads. He did not know if the government gave financial help for these projects, and said that the Gram Pradhan alone conducted all such transactions. Understanding that all attempts to work would be futile, Jalaluddin stopped attending the Gram Sarkar meetings. He claimed that some other members, too, had left the Gram Sarkar in Rainagar for similar reasons.

Mohammad Badiur Rahman was forty-seven years old and had studied up to class ten. He did not own any land, and pulled a rickshaw for a living. He appeared confused in his ideas about politics. Badiur admitted that although he preferred the AL after independence, since he was a Gram Sarkar member from the BNP, he supports that party now. It must be noted that Gram Sarkar members were not supposed to be selected on partisan
grounds. Badiur had some experience in fish cultivation, and was therefore put in charge of livestock and pisciculture development in Rainagar. Unfortunately, he did not get adequate time to work on these projects. He attended most of the Gram Sarkar meetings, and thought that there had been considerable improvements in the law and order situation and local settlement of disputes after the formation of Gram Sarkar.

Nasrin Jahan was a twenty-two year old housewife who had attended school up to class nine. She was extremely shy and could not answer most of my questions. She was in charge of Family Planning and Women's Affairs in Rainagar. Nasrin Jahan attended all meetings of the Gram Sarkar until she got married and left the village. Her position remained vacant and was not filled by selecting another member.

Razia Sultana was twenty-two years old, had studied up to class nine, and was selected as the Gram Sarkar member in charge of cottage industries in Rainagar because of her expertise in sewing and knitting. She was a housewife and her family did not own cultivable land. She could not afford spare time for Gram Sarkar, however, and tendered her resignation to the Gram Pradhan. Another Gram Sarkar member informed me that her resignation was not accepted. However, Razia Sultana lost interest and stopped attending the meetings.
AN OVERVIEW

Gram Sarkar was established in Rainagar in June 1980. With a few exceptions, most of its members had positive views of its accomplishment in the village, and expressed the hope that if it were allowed adequate time, major changes could have been successfully initiated. Regular meetings were held to discuss local problems, but most of the time they were devoted to settling disputes. Gram Sarkar members claimed that their verdict on such matters was generally accepted by the concerned parties. The members could only cite the repair of roads and distribution of relief materials as other accomplishments of Gram Sarkar.

The residents of Rainagar seemed to be aware of general political and administrative problems due to its proximity to a district headquarter town. Many people said they attended meetings of the Gram Sarkar. Over two-thirds of the villagers interviewed said they knew Gram Sarkar members, a small percentage knew only the Gram Pradhan. However, none of the members were considered capable or reliable enough when it came to helping the villagers in times of need. Most people would go either to the present Chairman of the Union Parishad, Mansur Rahman, or to the former Chairman, Fazlur Rahman. The Gram Pradhan's name was not mentioned, probably because he was in jail at the time the interviews were conducted. Surprisingly, about half the respondents thought Gram Sarkar was run efficiently in Rainagar, and approached and received help from its leaders. About four-fifths of my respondents in Rainagar...
said Gram Sarkar had brought about changes in the village. But they could specify only road repairs and distribution of wheat to widows in the village as the only successful efforts.

The distribution of portfolios among Gram Sarkar members in Rainagar showed that this unit departed slightly from the pattern suggested by the government. The Gram Sarkar Manual listed the following responsibilities to be allocated among the members: food and agriculture; pisciculture and livestock; family planning and women's affairs; communication, works and forestry; office management and religious affairs; cooperatives and cooperative banks; law and order; mass education; youth, sports and cultural affairs; cottage industries; and health. In Rainagar, the Gram Sarkar amalgamated the portfolios of agriculture with forestry, and rural development with health, and put a member in charge of a new department to deal with landless peasants. The local leadership thus demonstrated the willingness to modify the proposed set-up to adjust to the conditions in the village.

The Gram Pradhan was able to convince his colleagues of the utility of Gram Sarkar. But his rivals were more successful with the villagers, who realized by the end of 1981 that Gram Sarkar had benefitted its members and not the common villagers. They could approach other influential people in the village and the Union Parishad, and receive better assistance. Most Gram Sarkar members worked full time at their jobs or businesses. They could not, or would not, devote enough time to Gram Sarkar as the volume of its work increased. Since membership did not
bring financial remunerations, the members had no incentive to work for the body. Within eighteen months of its establishment, two members had resigned, one got married and left the village, and a few others had lost interest and initiative.

In Rainagar, the selection of the Gram Sarkar members was presided over by the Gram Pradhan, who was anxious to select people likely to strengthen his bid for local leadership. The establishment of Gram Sarkar came as an opportunity for the Gram Pradhan to secure his position as the leader of the village. He succeeded in assembling a group of members willing to work under his leadership in the village body. These members were hoping to establish a link with the ruling political party through Gram Sarkar. They tried to attain political benefits by working for the BNP. Thus the party succeeded in developing a local group which, in their attempts to win factional battles, demonstrated support for the party in power. But this mutual exchange of benefits between the Gram Sarkar members and the BNP was used by the rival faction to tarnish the image of the new institution and its leadership.

There were two clearly defined factions led by Fazlur Rahman and the Gram Pradhan, Ali Ansar. The latter's source of power was his affiliation with the ruling party and his control over the new village institution. But Fazlur Rahman had established himself as a powerful leader in the locality over a long period of time. His bases of power were his wealth which was useful in helping the villagers, and his connections with influential people in the urban areas. The conflict between the
two leaders arose over the control of Rainagar, in this case, to be exercised through the institution of Gram Sarkar. The new local institution had to overcome the influence of Fazlur Rahman in the village to be effective in its operation.

The Union Parishad, meanwhile, contributed to the weakness of Gram Sarkar in Rainagar. Following past experience, the villagers had more confidence in the Union Parishad leadership. The Chairman of the Union Parishad was accessible and so was another member, Mafizuddin, who lived in Rainagar. They had closer links with the higher level of local government, and thus access to funds for local projects. Being close to a district town, the government could send its officials to Rainagar and demonstrate its presence. But their contacts in the village were limited to only a few leading personalities, and therefore, these union level leaders developed close links with the government officials. Gram Sarkar was bypassed by the villagers who were habituated to go directly to the Union Parishad leaders, who made all efforts to prevent power from trickling down to the lowest level.

Gram Sarkar members had not established themselves as capable leaders before assuming the responsibilities. Moreover, Fazlur Rahman who lost the official local leadership after the BNP initiated Gram Sarkar, continued his efforts to undermine the position of the new council. His contacts and wealth helped in influencing local decisions, and in making Gram Sarkar barely effective in Rainagar.

The accomplishments of Gram Sarkar in Rainagar are
impressive in comparison with the other villages which were studied. A relatively higher degree of mobilization had prepared the ground for the initiation of a local institution for the village level. There were some signs of progress, namely, a conscious and educated council, the organization of the Gram Sarkar and the execution of some local projects. But the success was limited because rival village factions came into conflict with one another. The faction that gained control of Gram Sarkar by expressing support for the government did not have a strong support base in the village to make the new institution successful.

Although Gram Sarkar was quite active in Rainagar during 1980-81 and the members were aware of their duties and responsibilities, very few of the objectives of the institution were accomplished. The members admitted that the only areas in which some work had been done were law and order and road repairs. These hardly justified the creation of a new local body since they could be carried out by the existing bodies. The lack of funds and the absence of a fixed source of income contributed to the loss of interest by some Swanirvar Gram Sarkar members. The institution could not undertake any major project and demonstrate its usefulness to the villagers.

Gram Sarkar in Rainagar succeeded in allocating responsibilities to its members, renting a room for the office, conducting regular meetings, and maintaining records of its operation. The villagers demonstrated a positive attitude towards its possibilities as an instrument for local
development. But the priorities accorded to various activities were not consistent with its objectives. Increased food production, development of cooperative bodies, and employment-generating rural development projects could lead to development in other areas. But Rainagar's Gram Sarkar leadership concentrated on law and order and the distribution of relief materials, the latter being crucial in winning over the loyalty of the rural poor. Gram Sarkar leadership in Rainagar accorded priority to building up a support base in the village through patronage and used government-awarded relief material for this purpose. Villagers were soon disillusioned about the significant changes Gram Sarkar was supposed to be initiating. Petty squabbles among the village leadership negated any possibility of implementing local projects. The lack of finances, combined with strong resistance from the established leaders in Rainagar, resulted in a situation with which Gram Sarkar could not cope.
NOTES


5 Bangladesh District Gazetteers Rajshahi. p. 83.


7 These figures were obtained by an employee of the University of Rajshahi, who was a permanent resident of the village from the former Gram Pradhan after his release from detention.

8 Bangladesh District Gazetteers Rajshahi. p. 248.


10 Bangladesh District Gazetteers Rajshahi. p. 324. This become the present site for Rajshahi town.


12 Stated by two Gram Sarkar members in their interviews.

13 Rashidul Hoq was interviewed on May 21, 1982.

14 Naresh Chandra Sarkar was interviewed in his house on May 23, 1982.

15 Equivalent to grade 12. Alam was interviewed on May 18, 1982.

16 Nasir Ali was interviewed in his furniture store on May 22, 1982.

17 Bazlur Rahman was interviewed on May 16, 1982.

18 Matiur Rahman was interviewed in his sawmill on May 19, 1982.
Jalaluddin was interviewed on May 20, 1982.

Badiur Rahman was interviewed in his house on May 23, 1982.

Nasrin Jahan was interviewed in her brother's house on May 23, 1982 when she came to visit him. Her brother, another Gram Sarkar member, helped her answer some questions.

Razia Sultana was interviewed on May 17, 1982. Another Gram Sarkar member, Atar Ali Sardar, who has an H.S.C. degree and was in charge of youth affairs in Rainagar, could not be interviewed. He made two appointments, but failed to show up each time.

VIII. GRAM SARKAR IN PRACTICE: A COMPARATIVE OVERVIEW

Gram Sarkars were introduced with the intention of improving living conditions in the villages of Bangladesh. The foregoing examination of three villages in the country shows that most of the specific objectives desired by the government were not achieved. Significantly, however, the degree of accomplishment varied among the villages. My objective in this chapter is to show that a comparative analysis of local government performance in the three villages I observed reveals a number of reasons for such variations, and provides clues to the conditions necessary for local government reforms to succeed.

There are several factors that must be considered in comparing the villages of Mantala, Colipur and Rainagar. The history of local institutions and their leaders obviously has some influence on the recent attempts at change. The distinctive features of the villages and the political, economic and social aspects of life therein must also be understood. I will now try to compare the indigenous conditions in the villages when Gram Sarkar was introduced, as well as the structure that was developed. The members of the new local institution and their position in the village social structure will be examined to see if there have been changes in local leadership. The functions performed by the Gram Sarkars in the different villages will also be compared to assess their accomplishments. A comparison of all these factors will reveal the reasons behind the variations in the degree of success.
experienced by Gram Sarkar in the three villages.

HISTORY

The evolution of a village and its past history are useful in analyzing the operation of local government institutions. They reveal some of the reasons for the present low level of participation by the villagers and the monopoly of leadership by a few wealthy families. The historical context will also enable us to compare the progress made under the Gram Sarkar scheme to that achieved under previous local government programs. The information available about the past of Mantala, Colipur and Rainagar, though scanty, will be used for this purpose.

The history of Mantala has witnessed little change over the period that the residents can remember. There are no records of any attempt to institutionalize local government. The villagers got used to following the directions of the leaders who belonged to the wealthy families and contributed very little to the making of decisions on local affairs. The setting up during British rule of a Municipality in Bajitpur, only two miles from the village, hardly affected Mantala or its leaders. None of the village leaders ever tried to participate in the affairs of Bajitpur Municipality. The dominance of a single family and the absence of any challenge from the others seem to have dampened the villagers' interest in participating in local affairs. Over generations, the villagers retained the attitude of leaving
important decisions to the discretion of the leaders. The leading families have links outside the village in the urban centres which most villagers do not have. As a result, these better-off families of Mantala were able to exercise control over the new local government bodies created by the Gram Sarkar.

Colipur has been dominated for about a century by a single family. So long as the family was united, there was no challenge to its leadership. The villagers continued to turn to the Bhuiya family for help in all matters. The independence of Pakistan and the expansion of economic activities opened up some opportunities for villagers who were willing to migrate to other areas in search of jobs. Even when they moved, however, they remained dependent on the Bhuiya family. This was because some members of the family had migrated to the urban areas earlier, and held positions of importance there. They helped the villagers in securing jobs in industries and in government offices. By the end of Pakistani rule, a few of Colipur's villagers had earned and saved enough money to launch small businesses on their own in the nearby commercial centre, Elliotganj. In the period following the independence of Bangladesh, some of them returned to take up permanent residence in Colipur. One family in particular, which had a reasonable amount of land in the village and flourishing businesses in Elliotganj emerged as the new leader in place of the Bhuiya family. Thus, Colipur has witnessed the transfer of local leadership from a traditionally dominant family to a rising middle farmer and business family. The history of the village
points to the fact that some changes have taken place over the years and that the villagers have realized that participation in local affairs can be rewarding. Some villagers had done well in business and service in the towns, and were being exposed to urban influences. Local residents were playing important roles not only in village affairs but in union level politics, too.

Rainagar is more a peri-urban community than a typical Bangladesh village. However, the description fits many villages situated on the outskirts of towns and cities. The pace of change has been rapid, and Rainagar is noticeably different from the other two villages I examined. Rainagar remained insignificant throughout the British period. After the independence of Pakistan and the establishment of several educational institutions on Rajshahi's outskirts, Rainagar gained in importance. The villagers became conscious of the need for local institutions and of their own role in managing local affairs. Wealthy residents of the village who assumed leadership of the local government institutions retained control throughout the Pakistani rule, and continued to do so for some time beyond 1971. Meanwhile, due to the peri-urban nature of Rainagar, the villagers were exposed to district and national level politics within a short period.

The differences in historical evolution are very clear. In the past, Mantala has experienced very little change and has seen no precedents for the incorporation of new people in local leadership. The villagers were not aware of the possibilities of new institutions and did not care to try them out. In
Colipur, a rift within the family that has dominated the village in the past, resulted in its loss of direct control over the village. The villagers were witnessing the rise of new leadership and the use of local institutions by these leaders to gain control. They could see that though change in leadership was possible, local institutions had failed to provide the needed services and encourage participation. Rainagar, on the other hand, has developed from a small community to a large and bustling village in a short span of time. The leadership has changed over the years and there are clearly defined groups engaged in conflict with one another. However, some services have been provided by local government institutions and participation by villagers has been greater in Rainagar than in Mantala or Colipur under Gram Sarkar.

POLITICS AND ECONOMY IN THE VILLAGE SOCIETIES

A comparison of the distinctive features of each village reveals the economic, social and political forces in operation. These factors play important roles in the composition and operation of local government institutions. In particular, I will try to compare the economic activities and their impact on the political and social conditions in the three villages of Mantala, Colipur and Rainagar.

Like most of the villages in Bangladesh, Mantala is an agricultural village. There has not been much improvement in
the methods of cultivation or changes in the distribution of land. The three wealthy families still own among themselves most of the land in Mantala. The majority of the 190 households in the village own small patches of land, and the number of landless labourers is low compared to other villages. As a result, very few people have ventured outside the village to look for gainful employment. The villagers have not been able to reduce their dependence on the wealthy families, for they have not discovered an alternative source of income to support themselves. Naturally, politicians at higher levels have to win over only some members of these leading families to ensure their control over the village.

Although Mantala has traditionally been a supporter of the Awami League (AL), the leaders of its Gram Sarkar claimed allegiance to several parties. The Gram Pradhan claimed to be a supporter of the Muslim League (ML), but was actually working for the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) in Mantala. Likewise, the political party preferences of all the leaders seemed superficial. So long, however, as the Gram Pradhan did not have a challenger from within one of the dominant families, there was no threat to his position. The villagers accepted his leadership because they received favours from his family. His position was secure because there was no alternative leader for local institutions.

Socially, Mantala has always been very harmonious. Being a small community with followers of only one religion and composed principally of cultivators, the village has not encountered
major social conflicts. The three leading families have had cordial relations in the past, and their attempts to expand wealth have occurred outside the village in the urban areas. The acquisition of more wealth by one has not resulted in the reduction of the other's land. The village has, therefore, remained peaceful and little change has taken place.

In sum, almost no development has taken place in Mantala. There are no good roads and other amenities of life are meagre. The standard of living is extremely low. The villagers have not been politically mobilized, and remain apathetic about the static conditions in Mantala.

Colipur, too, is an agricultural village, although it contains a small community of fishermen as well. Gradually, workers from the village started migrating to the urban areas, and the exposure to urban life made them aware of economic opportunities outside Colipur. At the same time, the Bhuiya family split into two factions and the rift cut their influence even further. Thus, by the end of Pakistani rule, some of Colipur's villagers were not entirely dependent on landed property in the village or on the Bhuiya family for their livelihood.

Colipur had been a stronghold of the AL for a long time, and most of the local leaders admit that they had supported the party at some point. Since the Bhuiyas, who worked for the AL, are no longer physically present and dominant, the new leaders found it convenient to shift their allegiance to the party in power, the BNP. The Union Parishad Chairman and the Gram
Pradhan had not turned against the Bhuiyas. They had, however, taken advantage of the conflict and disintegration within the family to increase their influence in Colipur. Since most members of the Bhuiya family did not live in the village, the villagers found the new leaders to be the best alternative as a source of help in times of need because they possess a substantial amount of wealth and have connections with the urban power centres.

Colipur is a large village composed entirely of Muslims. Several people are engaged in business and government service in addition to agriculture. Due to the high density of population, the villagers are pressed for land and there have been some violent incidents over the ownership and sale of lands, particularly among members of the leading Bhuiya family. Since the ownership affects many sharecroppers, many other villagers get involved in these disputes. The villagers resent the fact that they are totally dependent on a few leading families, but have not been able to decide on a course of action to change the situation and take steps to put it into effect.

Colipur was quite active in the liberation struggle and the political consciousness of the villagers is demonstrated in their expectations of improvements in living conditions. There are a few signs of past efforts at construction of roads and bridges. Colipur has been supplied with electricity since 1981. The projects aimed at improvements were not continued beyond the initial stages, and the village remains at the point it was when developmental activities were initiated.
The economy of Rainagar is quite different from that of Mantala and Colipur. Although some cultivation is carried out, its sandy soil and extremely hot and dry summers are not suitable for extensive farming. The villagers have had to explore resources outside Rainagar, and have entered the various educational institutions situated around the village as employees. Some villagers have established links with Rajshahi town through business and other contacts. Thus, the villagers live on incomes earned mostly outside Rainagar. However, they continue to live in the village because it is close to their place of work. Rainagar has begun to look like a suburb with brick buildings, electricity and telephone facilities, and a population that regularly commutes to Rajshahi town.

The leaders in Rainagar are obviously wealthy businessmen who have close links with the district headquarters of Rajshahi. Local power is distributed on the basis of wealth and ability to help villagers, mostly in financial matters. Since the local leader was a supporter of the National Awami Party [pro-Moscow] (NAP-M), he was challenged by an AL leader from the village. His wealth, influence and connections helped him to overcome the challenge. However, the frustrated AL leader joined the BNP in 1980. He was able to dislodge the previous village leader with direct help from the BNP. But he did not have a strong enough support base to continue as the leader of Rainagar and his faction soon lost control as villagers kept on going back to the previous leader for assistance.

Rainagar is the largest village among the three in size.
The density of population is low as most of the village is composed of char land, which occasionally is submerged beneath the river. Rainagar has a sizeable proportion of Hindus among its residents (15 per cent), and the villagers are engaged in various kinds of occupations. However, the most powerful people are the contractors and businessmen, and local leaders must have the support of these people in order to be successful. There are conflicts among the various interests, and these become manifest in attempts to obstruct proceedings of local council meetings. At such meetings, rival factions who are not in power try to prove the local body ineffective and question its actions. Small scuffles have taken place over such incidents. There are signs that the villagers have become conscious of the issues and stakes and have taken sides to strengthen the factions. There are more visible signs of improvement than in most villages of Bangladesh. Developmentally, Rainagar seems to have been better mobilized and has progressed further than either Colipur or Mantala.

It is extremely difficult to measure the extent of political mobilization that has taken place in the villages of Bangladesh. Nettl has described mobilization as an "induced" process which leads to substantial changes. Using the degree of such changes as the basis, assumptions can be made about the level of mobilization achieved in the three villages that were studied. The exposure to urban influence, links with district political and administrative elites, and the presence of an alternate group of leaders have contributed to a high level of
political mobilization in Rainagar. Mantala has not been touched by outside influences, and has not experienced a change of leadership. It can be said that, on a political mobilization continuum, Mantala and Rainagar seem to represent the two extremes while Colipur is near the centre. Mantala remains absolutely agricultural, while in Rainagar, agriculture is the occupation of only a quarter of the working population. Economically, Rainagar, with the lowest density of population, is better-off, while the other two villages face high population pressure. The villagers of Mantala are almost entirely dependent on the resources in the village, while those of Rainagar rely mostly on resources outside the village. In Colipur, one finds a combination of both.

In all the villages, traditional influence is no longer the sole determinant of local leadership. At present, possession of wealth and access to the ruling party politicians and government officials contribute more to the acquisition of influence. The leaders in Mantala and Colipur worked for the party in power, while in Rainagar, the aspirant leader joined the BNP before assuming village leadership. Mantala did not experience factional conflicts, while in Colipur, factional conflict within the leading family provided the opportunity for a new family to emerge as leaders. In Rainagar, the factions were more evident. The local conditions in the three villages were varied and required adjustments of the rules for Gram Sarkar to operate efficiently. But the scheme designed by the government prescribed the same institution for all the regions, and made no
allowance for such diversity. The rules were framed by the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives, and represented the views of the officials who are stationed at the Secretariat in Dhaka. The government approved them without any change; thus, the villages had the new institutions imposed upon them.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT: STRUCTURE, FUNCTIONS, PERSONNEL

In addition to the local conditions in which it operated, the operation of Gram Sarkars in the three villages must itself be compared. This will reveal the differences, if any, in their structures, functions, and the personnel involved. Differences in these areas may account for their varying degrees of success. The same scheme was inevitably implemented in different ways in each village. Although the basic structure suggested by the government was followed, the characteristics of the people involved in local government accentuated the differences resulting from local variations.
Mantala had its first local government institution under the Gram Sarkar scheme. In 1980, a small number of villagers attended the Circle Officer's inauguration of Gram Sarkar for Mantala. The Gram Pradhan was chosen by the villagers who were asked to attend the meeting. The Gram Pradhan then submitted a list of names for selection as Gram Sarkar members. Since only the supporters of the Gram Pradhan were present, nobody objected and Gram Sarkar was constituted. Five of the eleven members selected on that day were not present at the meeting. The members who were present were not informed of their duties and responsibilities at the time.

Gram Sarkar was not Colipur's first experience of a local government institution. Previously, various residents of the village had served as the Chairman and members of the Union Parishad, and before that, the Union Board. The Circle Officer (C.O.) of Muradnagar thana arranged the formation of Gram Sarkar in Colipur in 1980. The meeting was sparsely attended. The brother of the Union Parishad Chairman was selected as the Gram Pradhan. He got his list of Gram Sarkar members approved without any difficulty. About half of the villagers who were selected as members were not present at the meeting. Although the Gram Pradhan claimed that the members were assigned specific responsibilities, most of the members denied this, and stated that they had no knowledge about their assignments.

Rainagar has had the opportunity of seeing local government institutions in action since the late 1960s when the Union
Council Chairmanship of the Shamla Union was won by a resident of the village. When the Gram Sarkar scheme was announced, the villagers showed interest and about fifty villagers attended meetings of the new council. Fazlur Rahman, the most powerful man in the village, had already served as a union leader, and did not wish to return to the level of a village leader. However, he also did not want the new village leaders to succeed, especially if they belonged to another faction, since he considered them to be a potential threat to his position in Rainagar. But Fazlur Rahman and his followers were unable to prevent Ali Ansar from being selected as the Gram Pradhan. Ali Ansar successfully manipulated the selection of his own followers as Gram Sarkar members. Only two of the selected members were loyal to Fazlur Rahman. The village assembly selected a cousin of Fazlur Rahman and one of his supporters to serve on the council. Only one of the members was selected in absentia. The duties and responsibilities of all the members were promptly assigned.

The constitution and procedure of Gram Sarkar in the three villages were similar because they followed the Manual published by the government. They were dissimilar in most other respects. The villagers in Mantala and Colipur complained that they were not informed about the meeting that was held to constitute Gram Sarkar and accused the Gram Pradhans of manipulating the selection of their supporters as members. The members of Gram Sarkar in these two villages had no idea about the structure proposed by the government. Basically, they did not know what
they could do with the new institution imposed upon them. The Gram Sarkar members in Rainagar seemed to have understood the instructions contained in the Manual and set up an organization accordingly. It can be concluded that the leaders in Mantala and Colipur failed to follow the instructions for establishing a structure of local government institution. This was the first essential step that should have been taken before the Gram Sarkars could start functioning.

FUNCTIONS

Gram Sarkars were set up with the intention of executing a number of specific functions which would contribute to the overall development of the villages. A comparison of the functions performed and the achievement of the three villages in these areas will demonstrate the degree of success of Gram Sarkars. It is unreasonable to expect that all the assigned functions could be carried out in the short period over which Gram Sarkar operated. Some of the functions required a longer period of time to be completed. Therefore, I will attempt to include the initiation of some of these functions among those accomplished by Gram Sarkar.

Gram Sarkar in Mantala performed almost none of its expected functions. The leaders could not even set up an office for the council. A dilapidated room in the Member-Secretary's residence was used for the meetings, and the Member-Secretary
kept inadequate records of the meetings in a copybook in his house. The members and villagers were not informed of the functions of the Gram Sarkar. There was a list kept by the Member-Secretary which showed the portfolios held by each member, but it did not always coincide with the portfolios the members claimed to have held. Although the leaders claimed that meetings of Gram Sarkar were held regularly, only two meetings were actually recorded over a period of two years. Among the specific list of functions assigned to Gram Sarkar, the adjudication of some local disputes seemed to be its only accomplishment. Most of the other functions could not be initiated, and attempts at adult education through a night school lasted for only a few days.

More than half of the Gram Sarkar members in Mantala who were available for comment thought that the village council had failed to perform its functions. Although some of the villagers said that Gram Sarkar was being run efficiently, they could not point to any specific instance of improvement. The majority of the villagers who were interviewed stated that living conditions had not changed in Mantala since the establishment of Gram Sarkar in the village.

Gram Sarkar in Colipur fared marginally better in performing its functions. The village had the highest number of residents among the three under study and therefore, required more services from the local bodies. The basic function of organizing Gram Sarkar was not completed in Colipur. There was no separate office for the council, and the office of the Union
Parishad was used for occasional meetings. According to the Gram Pradhan, the duties and responsibilities were allocated among the members. But many of the members denied having any knowledge regarding what they were expected to do. The proceedings and records of the meetings were not filed, and the Member-Secretary said that they were waiting for Gram Sarkar to operate on a full scale before recording its functions.\(^5\)

Over a third of the Gram Sarkar members in Colipur considered the new institution to be a failure. Another third had no idea about its expected functions and therefore, could not comment on its functions. The members who thought Gram Sarkar had been successful in Colipur could cite only canal-digging and a night school as its accomplishments. The villagers witnessed no change following the introduction of Gram Sarkar. In terms of performing its designated functions, the new institution has failed in Colipur.

In Rainagar, however, it seems that Gram Sarkar was able to perform some of the functions for which it was established. All but one member was present at the meeting which selected the council. A room was rented for use as the office of Gram Sarkar. According to the villagers, most of the members could be found at the office in the evenings. Official stationery was printed and the letterhead included the names, qualifications and departments of the Gram Pradhan, the Member-Secretary and the members. The members were generally aware of the functions they were expected to perform for the new council.

Since Rainagar is not an agricultural village, extensive
efforts to increase food production were not undertaken. Both the villagers and members of Gram Sarkar agreed that the law and order situation had improved and disputes were being adjudicated locally in increasing numbers. Some repairs were made on the existing roads and a number of villagers gave credit to the Gram Sarkar for these works. The other areas in which the new council did some work, but was not very successful, were mass literacy and family planning. Contraceptives were distributed by the member in charge of family planning before she got married and left the village. As in the other villages I observed, night schools for adult education survived only for a short period of time. Members of Gram Sarkar felt that the other functions could not be performed because the new institution was not allowed adequate time. A high government official in Dhaka gave the same reason for the failure of Gram Sarkar to perform its functions, and added that by the end of the second or third year, the results would have become visible.  

Among the three villages under study, Gram Sarkar in Rainagar was able to perform more functions than the other two. The institution was well organized and regular meetings were held. At the meetings, local problems were discussed and projects finalized. A relatively high degree of political mobilization had prepared the village to utilize the new institution. In Mantala, meetings were rare and the attendance was slim. An extremely low level of political mobilization was manifest in the little interest displayed by the villagers
toward the local institution. The meetings of Gram Sarkar in Colipur were attended by some villagers as well as some members. The records of the performance of assigned functions to improve living conditions in Mantala and Colipur were not impressive. Thus varying degrees of readiness affected the performance of Gram Sarkar in the three villages.

PERSONNEL

The background, qualifications, and experience of the Gram Sarkar members differed in the three villages. These factors should be compared, and their impact on the relative success of the new councils in different villages assessed. The character of local government institutions is determined, to a large extent, by the quality of personnel operating the local councils.

Mantala had never had a local government institution prior to the creation of Gram Sarkar. As a result, the villagers had no experience of participating in, or providing leadership for, local institutions. A few of the villagers who had some experience with the Union Parishad, either did not want to get involved with Gram Sarkar, or were deliberately excluded by the Gram Pradhan. The people picked by the Gram Pradhan as members were either his loyal supporters or so totally apathetic that they would not question his decisions. Some of them were not interested and never showed up at meetings.
Five out of the ten Gram Sarkar members who were interviewed in Mantala were illiterate; one could only write his name, and two others had two to three years of schooling. The Gram Pradhan had attended school up to class seven. The Member-Secretary, who had the most years of schooling, had studied up to class ten. On the whole, the extremely low level of literacy and lack of experience in local government severely reduced the possibility of active participation by Gram Sarkar members in Mantala.

The average age of Mantala's Gram Sarkar members, excluding the sixty year old Gram Pradhan, was thirty-three years. In contravention of the rule that a member had to be at least twenty-five years old, two members aged twenty and twenty-two were selected. In accordance with the instructions of the government, two women were selected as members, but neither of them was ever called to the meetings or asked to perform any functions. About half of the members were small farmers owning between a half acre to three acres of land, and the others were landless. The Gram Pradhan and the Member-Secretary belonged to the wealthy families, and owned more land than any of the others. The dependence of the small farmers and the landless on the wealthy families rendered Gram Sarkar ineffective. The Gram Pradhan ran the council in an authoritarian way, and the members could not challenge his decisions.

Colipur had housed the Union Parishad office for some time, and some of the villagers were familiar with the operation of local government institutions. The Union Parishad members were
dominated by their Chairman who also had influence over his brother, the Gram Pradhan. The members of the Gram Sarkar were picked by the Union Parishad Chairman. Though he attempted to include representation from all areas of the village in the new council, its members were either the Chairman's loyal supporters or others who were unlikely to challenge his authority. In Colipur, too, meetings for the Gram Sarkar were rarely held, and all members and the villagers were not informed. As a result, the attendance was slim, and the Gram Pradhan did not face any objection to his decisions.

The average age of the personnel selected as Gram Sarkar members in Colipur was forty-six years. The local leaders were, therefore, much older in comparison to those in Mantala or Rainagar. Two of the members were illiterate and five had primary education. Three members and the Gram Pradhan had studied up to class seven and ten. The Member-Secretary had two bachelor degrees. The Gram Pradhan had some previous experience in local affairs as the commander of the village guards. One other member was involved in village affairs a long time ago, but he was too old to participate now and was included in the Gram Sarkar without his knowledge or consent. Five of the members were small farmers and the two female members were housewives from small farmer families. One member was a boatman as well as a farmer. All the members owned small plots of land. The Gram Pradhan, the Member-Secretary and two other members owned more land and were also engaged in business or other services outside the village. The membership of Colipur's Gram
Sarkar was thus composed of people with varied backgrounds.

The personnel involved in Gram Sarkar in Rainagar were different as there were no farmers in the council. Five of the ten members who were interviewed were engaged in service. Three members served at the University of Rajshahi and two were employed in the Jute and Sugar Mills. One employee of a Mill also owned a furniture store. Two members were full time businessmen, one was a rickshaw puller, but the two female members did not hold jobs. The Gram Pradhan was a college professor before joining Gram Sarkar. None of the members gave up their jobs or businesses to work for the new institution. The average age of the members excluding the Gram Pradhan was thirty-five years. The female members were both twenty-two years old, and therefore below the minimum age stipulated in the Manual published by the government. Most of the members did not own land; some owned small plots or barren lands.

Gram Sarkar members in Rainagar were more educated than those in the other two villages. Four members had studied up to class nine and ten, and four others had Higher Secondary Certificate degrees. Three members were commerce graduates, and the Gram Pradhan had two masters degrees. Because Rainagar is close to an urban centre and several educational institutions, there were opportunities for the villagers to participate in various social and political activities. About two-thirds of the members in Rainagar had previous experience in village affairs through local social and cultural organizations. The members were informed of the meetings of the Gram Sarkar and
most of them attended regularly and tried to fulfill their responsibilities.

In comparing the personnel of Gram Sarkar in the three villages, a number of observations can be made. The members in Mantala were a homogeneous group, because most of them were small or landless farmers working under a traditional leader. In Colipur, the group was composed of both small and middle farmers as well as businessmen. The Gram Pradhan was a middle farmer who was also a businessman and had the support of the traditionally powerful Bhuiya family. The Rainagar leadership was mostly composed of people employed in service. There were some businessmen and the Gram Pradhan was a professor. In Mantala, the Gram Sarkar members had an extremely low level of education and none of the members had previous experience of local government institutions or the management of village affairs. None of the leaders had any exposure to urban influences. The level of literacy among the Gram Sarkar leaders in Colipur was low, but higher than that of Mantala. Some of the members had worked outside the village and were exposed to external influence. Two of the leaders had participated in village affairs before. The average age of the leaders was higher in Colipur as compared to Mantala or Rainagar. The higher averages resulted from the inclusion of old and inactive members in the council. The Gram Sarkar leaders in Rainagar were, on average, younger than the leaders in Colipur, and much better educated. Most of them had previous experience of social, cultural and political activities and demonstrated
better understanding of the new institution's functions.

Although the Awami League (AL) had a strong base in Mantala, only one member claimed to be a former supporter of that political party. When interviewed, he preferred to be called neutral. Two other members said they were neutral while three others said that they always supported the ruling party, whichever it was. Some Gram Sarkar members claimed themselves to be supporters of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP). In Colipur, four members claimed that they were politically neutral at all times. Two members were neutral at the time they were interviewed, but had supported the AL previously. One member said he supported the BNP because he was in favour of the ruling party. Another Gram Sarkar member left the NAP-M to join the BNP because, he said, the former would never get into office. Four leaders including the Gram Pradhan said they left the AL to support the BNP. In Rainagar, the political affiliations were stated more clearly. Five members including the Gram Pradhan were previous supporters and workers of the AL who had joined the BNP. One member crossed over from the National Awami Party [pro-Moscow] (NAP-M) while another former AL supporter has become neutral now. One member was neutral before joining the Gram Sarkar, but later became a supporter of the BNP. Three other members claimed to have always remained politically neutral.

In Rainagar, most of the members openly stated their support for the political party that created Gram Sarkar. In Mantala, the majority of Gram Sarkar members tried to express
their neutrality or demonstrate their support for any party that came to power. Most of them did not know the name of more than two political parties, the AL and the BNP. Colipur remained in the middle range with the BNP favoured by about half of the Gram Sarkar members.

A comparison of the personnel of Gram Sarkar in the three villages reflects their differing degrees of preparedness. Rainagar, the village with relatively more educated and experienced leaders fared better in the task of organizing and running local government institutions. Political mobilization had produced a higher rate of participation and proximity to a district town was useful in getting assistance from the government. Mantala, in contrast, had illiterate and inexperienced leaders who could not even set up a working local institution. Colipur, at the middle range, had an experienced leader, but the weakness of the other Gram Sarkar members and the predominance of the Union Parishad Chairman rendered the new institution ineffective.

RELATIONS WITH THE UNION PARISHAD AND THE GOVERNMENT

The creation of Gram Sarkar and its proposed function of administering village-level development activities raised apprehension in most quarters. The previously existing local government system had the Union Parishad at the lowest level, and the villages were administered under the leadership of the
Union Parishad Chairman. The jurisdictions and functions of these two institutions were not clearly demarcated. Theoretically, Gram Sarkars were to be in charge of the villages, while the Union Parishads would administer the unions. In reality, the situation was much more complex. The Union Parishads have been administering the villages for many years. It was not easy for them to withdraw their control over the villages in favour of the new institution. The Union Parishads were run, for the most part, by politically ambitious village leaders who had established themselves in their positions after prolonged efforts. The Gram Sarkars were perceived by these leaders as an attempt to undermine their authority and thus most union leaders disliked the new councils. The government, in the rules, did not provide adequate guidelines on the relationship between the Union Parishad and Gram Sarkar. As a result, the two local government institutions could not always work in cooperation with one another.

One of the purposes behind the establishment of Gram Sarkar was to build closer links between the government in Dhaka and the villages of Bangladesh. The intent was to instill a sense of belonging in the villagers, and make them useful participants in the process of national development. The proximity of the villages to the government can be understood by examining the presence of government offices and officials in the villages, and their contacts with the local leaders and the villagers.

Mantala had been under the jurisdiction of a Union Parishad which had its office in an adjacent village. The creation of
the new councils, without proper definition of jurisdiction and duties, resulted in distrust and confusion. The Union Parishad leaders considered Gram Sarkar to be an attempt at undermining their authority. They felt that the residents of the union had elected them as representatives to public offices. They had, therefore, legitimate claim over local leadership. The selection of Gram Sarkar leaders by a meeting did not give the latter equivalent legitimacy. Nevertheless, there was going to be a new set of leaders for Mantala. The Union Parishad leaders did not consider the Gram Sarkar leaders of Mantala to be honest or capable of carrying out their duties. The Gram Sarkar leaders, on the other hand, were not happy with the treatment they received from the Union Parishad leaders. The Gram Pradhan of Mantala complained that the Union Parishad Chairman of Dulalpur union was placing obstructions in the way of successful operation of Gram Sarkar and did not cooperate with the leaders of the new institution.

The mutual distrust added to the complications that were already manifest in the relationship between the two institutions. The Gram Sarkar was expected to raise its own funds for local projects, which proved impossible in Mantala. Obviously, the council had to depend entirely on the Union Parishad for funds. The Union Parishad leaders were not in favour of allocating funds to the Gram Sarkar, which was already viewed as a challenge to their leadership. Since the Gram Sarkar could not demonstrate any achievements in Mantala, the Union Parishad leaders and many villagers thought that it was
not needed in the village, and that these functions could just as effectively be performed by the Union Parishad. Thus, this immediately higher level of local government institution, which had been established for several decades, could not adjust easily to the Gram Sarkar.

Another dimension of the problem was the links of the two institutions and the village to the government. There are no government offices in Mantala and no government official resides in the village. Only a quarter of the Gram Sarkar leaders thought that government officials came to the village regularly and worked there; the others had never met any official. Over half the villagers who were interviewed had not seen government officials in the village, or thought that they came only when the influential villagers needed help. Since the Union Parishad had been operating for several years, its leaders had developed links with the government officials stationed in the nearby town. The hostile relations between Mantala's Gram Sarkar and the Union Parishad made it impossible for the former to use these links to its benefit. The village leaders had almost no links with the ruling political elite at the centre. The rulers did not seem concerned about the control of local government in Mantala. The village was not brought any closer to the centre through the institution of Gram Sarkar.

In Colipur, the two local government institutions of Union Parishad and Gram Sarkar operated from the same office and household. Due to the prevailing circumstances, the relationship between the two was not hostile in Colipur.
Instead, the older and more experienced Union Parishad Chairman patronized the new Gram Sarkar and its leaders. The Gram Pradhan was the younger brother of the Union Parishad Chairman. The members of Gram Sarkar were selected with the indirect approval of the Union Parishad Chairman, who treated the new council as his own creation. But he was careful not to extend its activities in such a way that his leadership could be challenged. The Gram Sarkar members reciprocated and deferred to his decisions on most matters.

However, the cordial personal relationship between the Union Parishad Chairman and the Gram Sarkar leaders did not contribute to the performance of functions by the latter. The other members of the Union Parishad who resided in Colipur considered the Gram Sarkar to be useless. The villagers did not turn to the new leaders for help and continued to consult the Union Parishad leaders. Since Gram Sarkar was not properly organized over its period of existence, all local projects had to be initiated and conducted by the Union Parishad. The Gram Sarkar did not even try to assert its role by working with the Union Parishad in these projects or initiating its own. The channeling of funds through the Union Parishad for such projects put the Union Parishad leaders in a commanding position in Colipur.

Since Colipur was the home of a former Member of the Provincial Assembly and AL leader, the government had some interest in setting up a base for the BNP there. This would not have affected the political alignments in Dhaka, but could
certainly help the ruling party in the presidential and parliamentary elections. Only three out of twelve Gram Sarkar leaders said that government officials came to Colipur and helped the villagers. Only one out of approximately thirty villagers who were interviewed made a similar statement. It appears that government officials seldom visited the village. On the rare occasions when they came to Colipur, they met only a few leaders. The Union Parishad Chairman, who had established links with the government officials at the thana level, did not encourage the other leaders to have similar connections. The wealthy family in Colipur which was split into two factions had some links with the government. But these people did not live in the village permanently, and their protege, the Union Parishad Chairman and his brother, the Gram Pradhan, utilized the links to their own advantage.

In Rainagar, the Union Parishad leadership was in conflict with the Gram Sarkar. The new council was being used by a political aspirant to challenge and replace the previous village leadership. The two institutions thus could not work in harmony, especially in a village where the Union Parishad members had been accepted as leaders for a long time. The Gram Sarkar got off to a good start in Rainagar by setting up an office and organizing its members to work in the village. The members, with one or two exceptions, were keen to perform their duties. The Gram Sarkar's plans appeared to be aimed at impressing the villagers with visible services, such as the distribution of relief materials and the adjudication of local
disputes. Moreover, the Gram Pradhan had links to the district unit of the ruling party and could probably arrange funds for Gram Sarkar to operate efficiently. The Union Parishad leaders became apprehensive and waited for an opportunity to discredit the new institution.

The Gram Pradhan made every effort to establish his claim to the leadership of Rainagar by making Gram Sarkar successful. His connections with the BNP were useful in successfully carrying out some local projects. But the opposition of established leaders in the village limited the achievements of Gram Sarkar. The Gram Sarkar and the Union Parishad did not work together in solving local problems. The interest of the village was forgotten amidst factional struggles. However, the determination to demonstrate results was responsible to a great extent for Gram Sarkar's more successful showing in Rainagar than in Mantala or Colipur.

Rainagar is an important constituency for the ruling political party since it is close to the town of Rajshahi and a number of educational institutions. The BNP definitely wanted to establish a support base in the village and the defection of the Gram Pradhan from the AL to the BNP was an advantage both to the ruling party and the local leader. The Gram Pradhan was able to persuade more government officials to visit the village, and the officials were probably ready to participate in the implementation of a national programme. Two-thirds of the Gram Sarkar members had observed government officials working in the village, and about two-thirds of the villagers who were
interviewed said that officials did come to Rainagar. Frequent visits by government officials can be expected in a peri-urban community and, though this does not conclusively prove that the village had come closer to the government, the increased number of visits by government officials to Rainagar bears some significance.¹¹

The relationship between Gram Sarkar and the Union Parishad is an important aspect that was overlooked in designing the new institution. The role of the Union Parishad was not adjusted in the light of the circumstances that were likely to arise with the introduction of Gram Sarkar. The leaders of both institutions were unsure of the nature of the relationship to be developed. As a result, personal feelings and attitudes shaped their interaction in different areas. In Mantala, veiled hostility developed because the Gram Sarkar was perceived as an attempt to displace the Union Parishad leadership. The Union Parishad did not cooperate with Gram Sarkar. In Colipur, the Union Parishad leader had the Gram Sarkar under control and was able to dictate its formation and operation. There was thus no scope for Gram Sarkar to develop as an independent local body. The situation in Rainagar was one of open hostility. The Gram Sarkar leaders wanted to overshadow the Union Parishad, and the latter was determined to prove the ineffectiveness of the former.

Proximity to the government has not been developed in Mantala and Colipur through Gram Sarkar. Government officials visited Rainagar more frequently, probably because the village
was close to the town and easily accessible. These factors have already brought Rainagar closer to the government than most other villages. Therefore, the credit for this accomplishment cannot be awarded to Gram Sarkar.

**AN OVERVIEW**

A summary review of Gram Sarkar in the three villages indicates that Mantala received absolutely no benefit from the new institution. Colipur, too, saw no visible improvement; meanwhile, Rainagar had some direct as well as indirect changes. The quality and amenities of life remained the same and the low level of participation in local affairs continued in Mantala. The village was still under control of the three big families and the abolition of Gram Sarkar hardly made any difference. Mantala had changed little since colonial times, and there seemed, moreover, almost no need or demand for change. There had been no investment of resources by the government in development works for the village. Gram Sarkar left no impression on the village; it was imposed on Mantala from the centre, and within a short time it faded away. Isolation from the rest of the country, therefore, was not broken.

Some development had taken place in Colipur. There were a few brick structures and electric supply within the village. But there was no visible impact of Gram Sarkar, and the living conditions remained the same. Deeper investigation, however,
revealed some changes. The cleavage in the traditionally powerful family had prepared the way for a new group of leaders to rise to prominence. Although the new leaders, again, were from one family, the change was significant. People in Colipur were more aware of the problems of the village and had been exposed to urban influence. Increasingly, economic resources were not coming totally from within the village; some were being brought in from other areas where the villagers were employed or conducted business transactions. As an indirect result of these socio-economic changes, the success of Gram Sarkar was marginally better in Colipur than in Mantala.

The changes were more prominent in Rainagar. The distribution of power could be clearly perceived, and external linkages became important because most economic resources were brought in from outside the village. The villagers were aware of local problems, and a relatively capable and educated group of Gram Sarkar leaders were successful in organizing local government. Being a peri-urban community, Rainagar required the local leaders to provide some results to satisfy a relatively more conscious group of villagers. They were able to utilize their close links with the government through district political leaders. Compared to the other two villages, Gram Sarkar was more successful in Rainagar, in spite of a strong factional cleavage.

Why did the same institution yield different results in the three villages? The explanation may be found in the differences among the villages. Rainagar was the most mobilized among the
three. Colipur was less mobilized, and Mantala, still under the control of the wealthier families that had dominated the village in the past, was the least. In Colipur, the single dominant family had split into two, and political alignments had developed around a new family. The winners in the battle for local control did not face strong challenges from other villagers. In Rainagar, large factions under two leaders competed with one another for control. The links between Mantala and the government as well as the rest of the country were almost non-existent. Colipur had some links, while in Rainagar, the interaction was constant.

The effect of location and regional differences on the outcome of Gram Sarkar cannot be isolated, but they do not seem to affect to a great extent the performance of local government bodies. Bangladesh is a relatively small country, has a fairly homogenous population in terms of language, religion and culture, and only small variations in climate and crops. The north-western region in which Rainagar is located is slightly different in crop patterns and extremities of climate, but similar in most other respects. The other villages are located in virtually similar regions. It seems that regional variation is not extensive enough to be considered an important factor explaining differences in local government performance.

What, then, made Gram Sarkar more successful in Rainagar than in Mantala or Colipur? The level of mobilization prevalent in the village at the time of introduction of Gram Sarkar is important. Rainagar was a step ahead of most other Bangladesh
villages in this respect. The location of the village and the residence of a fair number of outsiders in Rainagar had some effect on the composition and operation of local government institutions. Some consequences of mobilization are reflected in the qualifications of the village leaders. Due to easy access to educational institutions and the urban nature of Rainagar, the leaders were better educated in comparison to those in the other villages. Rainagar's villagers had already experienced some changes and their expectations were rising. In Rainagar, Gram Sarkar had to show some progress or lose the confidence of the villagers totally. The leaders made every effort to establish their credentials.

Political mobilization contributed to the forging of better links between Rainagar and the government and its officials. In spite of resistance from the more experienced Union Parishad leadership, the Rainagar Gram Sarkar leaders were able to demonstrate some results. Linkages with external officials and groups enabled them to secure funds and initiate some local projects. Lack of interaction with government officials in the other villages made the Gram Sarkars totally dependent on the Union Parishad, with the result that the Union Parishad leaders tried to control the Gram Sarkars or obstruct their operation so as to discredit the new institution.

Proximity to urban centres may be looked upon as a factor that speeds up the process of mobilization. The changes in Rainagar, no doubt, had occurred because of its closeness to a district town. The establishment of educational institutions
near the village has also contributed to these changes. But while Rainagar is three miles from Rajshahi town, Mantala is less than two miles from the small town of Bajitpur. Nevertheless, Mantala has remained untouched by urban influences. Colipur is about twenty miles from the town of Comilla, but seems to have responded better to changes than Mantala. Thus, it appears that mere proximity to urban centres alone is not a determining factor. The extent to which the villages acquire urban characteristics, and the frequency of interactions with towns must also be considered.

Cleavages, divisions and factions within the villages emerge as important factors. In Mantala, cleavages were not prominent, and there was little change. The leaders in control of Gram Sarkar did not face challenges and were under no pressure to demonstrate success. They were, therefore, in no danger of being displaced by an alternative group of village leaders. Gram Sarkar in Colipur was under complete control of the Union Parishad Chairman. The factions led by the two sections of the wealthy family were not of equal strength, and the stronger faction allowed the Union Parishad Chairman to assume leadership. The other faction was disorganized and could not challenge him. Gram Sarkar was thus under no pressure to provide services. The transfer of leadership to a new family seems to have satisfied, to a degree, the expectations of the villagers for a change in Colipur. The factional patterns in Rainagar, on the other hand, were clear. The two major factions were engaged in conflict and the group in control of Gram Sarkar
had to demonstrate its efficiency, or lose its place in local government.

From this description of three villages, it can be seen that the success of local government depends, to a large extent, on the preparedness of the locality to receive new institutions. The process of mobilization makes some basic changes by expanding literacy, making the population generally conscious, and providing scope for developing alternative leadership. The more mobilized a village is, the better it is prepared to receive new institutions and responsibilities. The process is facilitated by the pressures that the leaders feel from the villagers and other aspirants for local leadership. In villages like Rainagar, a faction with approximately equal power and capability poses a threat of displacement to the faction in office and compels it to demonstrate results. In villages where the factions are not evenly matched in strength, two situations may develop. In one, as exemplified in Colipur, the dominant faction prevails and becomes complacent; the minority faction is subordinated and becomes apathetic. The other possibility, not illustrated here, is outright factional warfare which precludes all local government activity. But there are many cases like Mantala where there are no factions and no competition. In them, locally powerful leaders simply coopt new local government institutions. Nothing can be accomplished in these villages if such leaders are excluded.

In analyzing the failure of local government reforms in Bangladesh, indigenous conditions in the villages appear to be
the most important variable. Although this study encompasses only three out of approximately 68,000 villages in the country, the explanation can be extended to most Bangladesh villages. Any institution imposed from the centre will be successful only to a certain degree. Success seems to be achieved with less difficulty in villages that have become prepared for reforms through mobilization and the establishment of links with the urban areas. So far, the plans formulated for such changes do not make provision to adjust to the numerous variations that exist among the villages. As a result, only a handful of the villages are able to accomplish some of the functions that they are assigned. Local government reforms do not touch most of the villages and the number of successful villages remains negligible.
NOTES

1 A village located in the periphery of towns, and exposed to a considerable degree of urban influence.

2 The land rises out of the river bed in the dry season, but is usually taken back by the river during the monsoons.


4 A Deputy Secretary at the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives made this statement during an interview in his office at Dhaka on April 17, 1982.

5 The Member-Secretary of Gram Sarkar in Colipur made this statement in an interview on May 4, 1982.

6 Interviewed at the Secretariat in Dhaka on April 17, 1982.


8 Primary education in Bangladesh entails five years of schooling.

9 One member of Gram Sarkar in Mantala said he supported the Pakistan Democratic Party until 1975. In fact, the party had ceased to exist in Bangladesh since 1971.

10 The two Union Parishad members living in Colipur were interviewed on April 23 & 24, 1981.

11 Government pressure on officials to work closely with the villagers has resulted in more visits to villages which can be reached easily and in little time.
IX. CONCLUSIONS

In the preceding chapters, a number of findings relevant to local government reforms in Bangladesh have been established. In this chapter, I intend to present a brief summary of the findings and make some observations on the objectives, methods and consequences of local government reforms in countries like Bangladesh. I will examine each of these aspects from different points of view, and assess the possibility of extending the analysis presented in this dissertation to wider areas.

What are the causes of the continual failure of local government reforms in Bangladesh? Throughout the historical evolution of local government in Bangladesh and the periodic attempts to change it, one theme that consistently emerges is the reluctance of the central government to delegate power to the localities. In the early period, the centre of government, whether at Delhi, Calcutta or elsewhere, retained as much authority as possible and the villagers were left to the mercy of local powerholders. During British colonial rule, imperial distrust of the natives yielded the same results. The British did not have adequate personnel to administer every locality effectively. They tried to make up this deficiency by entrusting the administration of the localities to landlords. In alliance with central government officials, the landlords dominated rural society in Bengal. Gradually, the administrative arm of the government was extended, but devolution of authority did not go beyond the district and subdivisional headquarters. Later, the Pakistani rulers
introduced the electoral method to constitute local councils. This replaced the previous method of nominating members to local bodies by the government. Nevertheless, government officials were placed in key positions as ex-officio chairmen of local councils. They were able to exercise control on behalf of the central government. The trend continued even after Bangladesh became independent. The government pursued a policy of retaining control and directing programmes of rural development through the leadership of government officials.

In the contemporary period, the central rulers try to assert their presence in the rural areas by creating local government institutions and then maintain control by helping their supporters to dominate them. The supporters are, in most cases, followers of the same political party as the rulers. They enter the local councils usually with direct assistance from the central rulers. In other cases where party supporters do not succeed at the polls, the government seeks to win over the leaders who are elected through various incentives. The strategy works in the case of people who are coming to prominence in local politics for the first time.

There is another section of local politicians who acquired leadership status during previous reforms and extensions of local government institutions. They have established themselves as legitimate leaders, after being elected to important positions in the local councils. Weak links between the centre and the localities have resulted in strong local power bases for most of these leaders. They know that national politics can not
permeate the village power structure. Such leaders are able to maintain control over their localities without assistance from the ruling political party. Since they are in control of existing local government institutions, for example, at the union level, they too are reluctant to decentralize power to the lower levels. They try either to obstruct the operation of the new schemes such as Swanirvar Gram Sarkars, or to control them through a subservient local government council.

Thus, local government reforms suffer from a chronic unwillingness to decentralize power on the part of the central government and rural elites at the intermediate levels. In effect, local government institutions are imposed and controlled, either by the central government through its officials or by local elites above the village level. As the Gram Sarkar experience demonstrates, the lowest level units do not have the liberty of planning and implementing programmes according to the needs of the locality. Local government reforms cannot be expected to succeed as long as control is withheld by the government at the centre. The results are worsened by the usurpation of the small degree of delegated authority by local elites in control of local councils which have been operating for a long time. The first precondition for improving local government in the villages must be an adequate devolution of authority to the lowest level units.

A different way of looking at the problem is to examine particular cases where new local government institutions have been tried. This view from the bottom reveals that local
government reforms succeed in varying degrees because the level of preparedness to accept changes differs widely. The villages differ from one another in several respects. The particular history of each village, its geographical and economic characteristics, the mix of people and their past accomplishments add up to different levels of consciousness and ways of reacting to reforms. The lowest level units must be prepared to receive power and utilize it. The preparedness involves increasing political mobilization. The population must be made familiar with the process in which local government institutions operate and the role of the villagers in the system of local government. Lack of preparation will negate all possibilities of progress in spite of the best intentions and plans. The absence of capable local leadership and the inability to articulate demands for services make local government institutions ineffective, and the changes aimed at improvements do not succeed. Villages which have regular interactions with urban areas and which have been exposed to urban influences are able to perform relatively better in establishing and running new local government institutions. Thus, the preparedness of the localities to receive and utilize power emerges as a second important factor determining the success of local government reforms in Bangladesh.

The failure of local government reforms in Bangladesh can be explained by drawing together the two principal findings of this study. On the macro level, a sincere willingness to delegate power is essential. During British colonial rule, the
rulers did not want to create competing power centres by decentralizing authority, and local government institutions had restricted scope to develop. Later, some decentralization was made to establish a rural power base and provide legitimacy to the new military ruler of Pakistan, General Ayub Khan. The process resulted in the rise of a formidable group of rural leaders at the union level. They continued to dominate the rural scene even after the system which brought them to power was abolished. These union level leaders, naturally, were unwilling to see further decentralization in the local government system because it would threaten their dominant position in the rural areas. Thus, a major problem was the unwillingness to allow local government units to develop and operate effectively at the lowest levels.

The explanation must be supplemented, on the micro level, by assessing the preparedness of the villages to respond to changes in local government. In the only instance of the willingness of the government of Bangladesh to establish local government institutions at the lowest levels, it was seen that the villages were not uniformly prepared to accept the reform. Therefore, local government reforms require not only a willingness on the part of the central government and leaders at the intermediate levels to allow the development of local institutions at the lowest levels, but also proper preparation at these levels so they can meet the challenges presented by the reforms.

If the two preconditions I have specified are so
inadequately met, why are attempts made to bring about changes in the system of local government? The stated objectives of Bangladesh's rulers have consistently been the improvement of living conditions in the localities and increased participation by the local residents. British colonial rulers and Pakistan's governments as well as the rulers of independent Bangladesh have announced these to be the objectives before every attempt to initiate changes in local government. Yet, an analysis of the conditions under which the reforms were introduced and their consequences demonstrate that other objectives predominated. The British, by and large, simply reacted to the demands for self-government by urban elites, and tried to associate more local people in the process of governing. The creation of local bodies and the inclusion of natives in these institutions satisfied, for a period of time, the aspirations of local elites to participate in the affairs of the government. Thus, the appeasement of the native population, not the improvement of rural life, was the main objective of the British government as it introduced changes in the system of local government.

After the departure of the British, there were no attempts at major changes until the first military rulers of Pakistan felt the need to establish a power base for themselves in the rural areas. In their efforts to legitimize their continuation in power, they too, attempted to reform local government. The elected leaders at the union level were used as their support base and were easily won over to the government's side. These local leaders provided the government with much needed support
to continue in power up to 1971.

Contrary to all expectations, no major changes were planned or initiated during the first government of Bangladesh led by the Awami League (AL). The existing rural power structure was considered adequate as the party did extremely well in the elections. Several local leaders had become supporters of the AL during the period of the liberation war. When a new party was launched by Bangladesh's military rulers, and came to power in the elections of 1979, it was not surprising that the government it formed became keen to introduce major changes in the local government system. The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) needed a rural support base, and the creation of new local government institutions provided the party with an opportunity to win over local leaders. Thus, while all attempts at reforms in local government were ostensibly aimed at satisfying the aspirations of the people to participate in local affairs, and at improving conditions in the localities through rural development, they were primarily intended as a network of support for the central rulers.

A second area of concern is the strategy pursued in reforming local government. The decision to reform local government is made by the central ruling elites. The usual pattern has been for the central elites to decide on the nature of changes required. They also tend to control the implementation of the reforms. Government officials at a central secretariat design the new institutions, and determine the functions to be assigned to the councils. Even the control
of local councils rests with the government officials who are entrusted with the task of constituting and supervising the local bodies. Thus, the ways of improving living conditions in the villages are determined by officials and approved by politicians who operate in the capital city. They have very little idea about village conditions, and cannot design reforms in the light of experience. Not surprisingly, then, the schemes imposed on the localities from the centre do not succeed or continue.

An alternative strategy may be advocated, of allowing the localities to decide on the needs and procedures of local government reforms. The local inhabitants have the best knowledge about the available resources and the optimum way of utilizing them to tackle problems. For this reason, according to this strategy, the local institutions should be awarded as much autonomy as possible. Only in cases where extraordinary inputs beyond the means of local councils are required, should the government be approached for help and guidance. The strategy of planning and executing local projects at the lowest level is a significant step often overlooked in local government reforms in Bangladesh. Spontaneous activities at the local level would reflect the level of preparedness a village has attained, and allow the local government institutions to plan and operate projects best suited to local conditions. The strategy to be pursued in reforming local government and improving conditions of living at the lowest levels must, for the most part, emphasize the role of local councils.
What have past reform attempts contributed to the system of local government in Bangladesh? Judging by the conditions prevailing in the rural areas, very little has been accomplished in terms of improved living standards. Although there have been sporadic instances of some betterment such as improved roads, irrigation facilities, or the supply of electricity in some villages, the basic needs of more productive agriculture, health, education and welfare are still largely unattained. The political objectives of creating a support base for the rulers were, of course, periodically achieved. Local government reforms helped to fulfill at least some people's desire for political participation, and they did allow the rulers to continue in office.

Starting from the colonial period, there has been some progress. Local councils were created and indigenous elites were given an opportunity to participate. Gradually, the practice of nominating members to local bodies was abolished and the principle of election was introduced. The local government system was extended to include localities which were previously neglected. It is natural to expect that the cumulative effect of all these steps would be a system which would respond to future attempts at change. But that has not been the case in Bangladesh since past reforms were not planned well with an eye on future development.

Instead, all reform attempts in local government were focussed on the immediate political benefits for the rulers. Frequent changes in government at the centre and the effort to
establish new support bases for rulers who capture power has
affected the continuity in the development of local
institutions. New rulers display a tendency to abolish
institutions introduced by the previous rulers. Local
government institutions face continual disruption and therefore,
cannot prepare the ground for future improvement. Most reforms
introduced so far have gradually been forgotten after their
cancellation. Therefore, all attempts to reform local
government in Bangladesh have to start anew, with no base to
build upon.

Reform implies the amendment and improvement of a system.
An examination of the Bangladesh evidence reveals that changes
in local government have not necessarily resulted in
improvements, although that was the stated objective of the
governments initiating the changes. Reforms should produce a
continued betterment of life in the localities, as a by-product
of increased awareness and participation by the residents. In
Bangladesh, past attempts have only rarely yielded such
consequences. Most "reforms" have merely been attempts to alter
or adjust existing structures of local government to appease the
expectations of the people or serve the interests of the ruling
group.

The distinction between reforms and changes must be noted.
Many of the changes in Bangladesh were directed merely at
altering the titles of local bodies, keeping the older
structures and their position in society intact. Others created
or abolished local government institutions, but did not try to
fit new institutions in the existing system. Past experience of changes and their failures were seldom taken note of, and were not used to design new institutions. Improvements could not be attained even after several changes had been brought about in the local government system of Bangladesh.

These conclusions follow from an analysis of the history of local government reforms in Bangladesh and an examination of three village-level institutions of Swanirvar Gram Sarkar. The part of the explanation based on the analysis of history can be applied to the entire country. Central control has been an area of major concern in the past. But the supplementary part of the explanation for the failure of local government reform in Bangladesh is based upon the experience of only three out of thousands of villages. The three villages are located in different parts of the country and represent localities at various stages of change and transition. The major differences among them are comprehensible in terms of levels of political mobilization. All of the villages of Bangladesh can be similarly placed on a continuum of mobilization, at different levels of preparedness to establish and operate local government institutions. It is hoped that the explanation I have developed in this study can be extended to analyze the failure of local government reforms in other parts of Bangladesh.

Although the explanations stem from an examination of local government in a particular country, the findings of this study may be useful for the analysis of reforms in other developing countries. In doing so, all the goals and objectives, both
stated and unstated, along with the circumstances under which reforms are introduced, must be considered. Such analysis will reveal whether the changes are aimed solely at improvements in the local government system. Not just any change can be considered a reform. The change must be aimed principally at improvement of living conditions in the localities. This can certainly be tried in conjunction with attempts to strengthen the position of a political party in the country. But all efforts must be made to prevent the latter from taking precedence over the former.

The attempts at improvements in the local government system, to be successful, must be based on a strategy that places emphasis on the local institutions. Strict control at the centre stunts the development of local bodies and discourages popular participation. At the top, the centre must be willing to devolve control of local affairs to the local councils. This does not mean statements to that effect on paper, but as much autonomy as possible in practice. Steps must also be taken to allow the autonomy at all levels of local government. The new institutions should be designed in such a manner as to allow adequate scope for operating without being intimidated by older local institutions and their leaders. In the same spirit, local institutions at all levels must cooperate instead of competing with one another for funds and control.

At the bottom, localities must be carefully prepared to respond well to the reforms. Reforms present new opportunities for local residents to participate in public affairs. Adequate
preparation is necessary to execute the new responsibilities. Mobilization results in a higher level of literacy and consciousness, and increases the scope for grooming a set of good leaders. These factors, along with regular exposure to outside influences, can result in a balanced distribution of power in the community. The possibility of total domination by one or a few families is reduced, and the locality is able to come up with an alternate set of leaders when need arises. A well-prepared locality is the best supplement to the willingness of the centre to actually reform local government.

Previous attempts at reforming local government in Bangladesh are not totally wasted. The willingness of governments to change existing systems and the creation of new institutions are indications of some progress, however temporary. Every attempt has brought new groups of people into the process of local government. They have acquired some experience in spite of the short periods of time over which the new institutions operated. These advances can be used to the advantage of future reforms, as long as the willingness of the centre to delegate control is matched by the readiness of localities capable of responding to the challenge.
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