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BUREAUCRACY-PEOPLE RELATIONS AND ACCESS PROBLEM IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT OF BANGLADESH

The underdeveloped conditions in overwhelmingly rural societies with large peasant population generally account for considerable state intervention. One of the means of such intervention is the state sponsored rural development programme in which the bureaucracy is directly engaged for its implementation. In Bangladesh there has been governmental involvement in the development process to a great extent, but the bureaucratic style of administering rural development programmes often results in problems of government delivery of resources and it prevents effective organisation-people relations. In this paper, an attempt will be made to discuss the bureaucratic organisation and problems of bureaucracy-people relations in Bangladesh, the appropriateness of bureaucratic rationality, the access procedure, the domination of bureaucracy over inputs and access problems faced by the rural poor in Bangladesh.

The Bureaucratic Organisation and Bureaucracy-People Relations

The bureaucratic machinery of Bangladesh has inherited a colonial character. In spite of the adoption of mass oriented development policies and programmes, the bureaucrats are still regarded as the law enforcing authority who are often detached from the public because of their colonial paternalistic attitudes. Combining the roles of maintaining law and order and coordinating development

projects has resulted in a bureaucratic style of performing functions. Decisions are made through a cumbersome process of file work involving official hierarchy which often creates unnecessary delays and leads to ineffectiveness. The organisational system, therefore, is not suitable either to the task of implementing complex development programmes or improving specialised skill and knowledge to face the demand of the poverty stricken rural populace. There has been a bureaucratic mentality among the government officials which often prevents them from going to the grass root levels and working with the mass of the peasantry. This elite oriented attitudes of the bureaucrats thus alienate them from the rural poor.

In order to implement and administer the government's development programmes, civil bureaucracies have been greatly expanded. An example indicating the growing expansion of government bureaucracy can be cited here. At the time of independence, it was estimated that there were 450,000 workers of all grades working in the public sector and by 1973, total employment in the public service had increased to over 650,000.¹ The Administrative Reorganisation Committee set up in 1982 found in its work that the expansion of government bureaucracy was beyond manageable proportions which increasingly blurred the responsibility and authority of the officials and impaired their efficiency.² Such proliferation of public bureaucracy seems to become counter productive in the sense that for maintaining a huge bureaucracy the government has to spend a considerable amount of public money. Thus the burden of paying the bureaucracy has to be borne by the whole population. Again, the differentiation and compartmentalisation of government agencies result in overlapping of functions and unnecessary competition among them. For example, BRDB, BKB and BADC in some cases perform similar roles of supplying agricultural inputs and credits to

1. World Bank, *Bangladesh : Economic Trends and Development Administration*. Report No. 4822, 1984. P. 109

2. *Ibid.*

the people. Rural recipients often become confused and non-cooperative when different organisations and agencies do the same kind of functions.

One of the distinctive features of rural development in Bangladesh is a high degree of centralisation through bureaucratic control which often results in the alienation of the rural population from the development process. In order to obtain people's support and thus to legitimise its regime, the government in recent years introduced rural mass mobilisation campaign through the programmes like *Swanirvar* movement or self-reliant village government. However, almost all actions in such campaigns and development projects were guided from above. For instance, the involvement of the President's secretariat in self-reliant movement resulted in a thorough bureaucratisation of the programme. Increased governmental intervention in every day affairs of the rural institutions went against the ideas of self-reliance, bottom-up planning or popular participation resulting in the loss of confidence of the people in development actions.³ Central direction and command thus undermine innovativeness and lead to reliance on bureaucratic elitism. Obaidullah Khan commented that "the bureaucratic style of administering development projects/programmes is partly responsible for the continued remoteness of the rural poor from policy decisions and consequent inertia and passive dependence."⁴

In order to reach the mass of the rural population the government's policy has been to decentralise activities. This process rather takes the form of deconcentration where the members of the bureaucracy engaged in administering development projects at the regional, district or local level remain responsible to their parent ministry at the centre rather than to the people. An imbalance is thus noticed : on the one hand, the government wants a closer interaction between

3. Khan and Zafarullah (eds). *Rural Development in Bangladesh Trends and Issues*. Dhaka : Centre for Administrative Studies, 1981

4. Obaidullah Khan, 'Government Commitment and the Development process' (mimeo). 1979 P. 44,

the poor peasantry and the civil servants and on the other hand there is the prevalence of a bureaucratic type of administration. Vylder (1982) noted that "there is a tremendous contrast between the top-down hierarchical way of planning and implementing development

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programmes in Bangladesh and a mobilisation-oriented strategy aiming at releasing the full potential of the villages' human resources through collective activity."⁵

People's participation is considered by the bureaucrats as mere interference who regard development problems as administering projects rather than associating rural population with the projects. They are inclined to believe that they see the problems in terms of correct expert advice and thus their decisions are well informed, rational and supported by the available evidence and that the role of the ordinary citizens is just to legitimise those decisions and to be instructed.

Appropriateness of Bureaucratic Rationality

In Bangladesh, the bureaucracy is massively involved in the allocation of resources to the rural sector. Bureaucratic allocation however, is in itself a reflection of a rationality.

Bureaucratic rationality explains administrative institutions or agencies which are characterised by a high degree of compartmentalised structures with strictly divided and clearly defined functions and activities. This leads to abstracting the differentiated aspects of an individual's life. As a result, an individual client is represented by a series of cases and the concept of a complete human picture is not

5. Stefan de Vylder, *Agriculture in Chains, A Case Study in Contradiction and Constraints*. London : Zed Press 1982 P. 66.

pertinent. Due to this reason, bureaucratic administration is regarded as impersonal, because in such a system it is not the individual person but the cases which only come under consideration. Cases are often explained by precedents which are kept in rule books and gazettes for record. The intention is to guarantee standardization of administrative judgements for the purpose of establishing justice and fair treatment.⁶

In a bureaucratic administration individuals are expected to follow official principles and rules while interacting with the concerning staff or officer. They should have the knowledge that the solution of their problems are not to be made by only one money-lender, landlord or patron but by a number of separate organisations and procedures. Thus, in order to obtain necessary credit, fertilizer or other agricultural inputs they will have to deal with different administrative sources and differentiated structures of various government agencies. But in a predominantly rural society such as Bangladesh, the majority of the poor peasants live in a social condition where they have to depend on village *mahajan*, landlord or patron for their needs. This is the convenient way they know to solve their immediate problems. Therefore, the social practices of the poor peasantry in which the structures of interaction are less differentiated and less compartmentalised, often clash with the values and principles of bureaucratic rationality. However, the inappropriateness of bureaucratic rationality is responsible for restricting the access for services for those outside the rational principles.

The Access Procedure

The method of obtaining service through the bureaucracy can be explained as the access procedure. Schaffer (1980)⁷ noted that all

6. G.D. Wood 'State Intervention and Agrarian Class Formation: Dimensions of the Access Problem in the Kosi Development Region of N.E. Bihar, India. in *Public Administration and Development*. Vol. 4. Issue No. 4, 1984.
7. See B. Schaffer, 'Rural Development Planning and Administration' in *Integrated Rural Development Programme*, Report of a Seminar published by CASLE (Commonwealth Association of Surveying and Land Economy), London, 1980.

institutions dealing with the distribution of services to the public have to develop an access procedure. The access procedure functions through a system of queue. In a simple ideal queue three stages are found : admission, ordering and encounter. It is a requirement for the applicant at the 'gate way' to prove that he is quite eligible to enter into the queue. Thus the applicant has to follow admission rules. In the second stage, there comes the question of the order in which the applicants are dealt with. Individual clients are ordered in accordance with particular 'line rules'. In the third and final stage, the applicant reaches the counter. Here the members of the bureaucracy consider the 'case' of the individual clients according to 'counter rules' and then decisions are made regarding the allocation of services to the applicants.

Admission rules in a simple queue system are unambiguous and relatively stable. The line rules involve the simple form of 'first in first out'. The applicant, however, may be required to present a straightforward case at the counter which should be based upon accepted and known information.

Schaffer and Huang⁸ mentioned that queues can be complex. There may not be clearly defined rules. A considerable amount of discretion may be involved in the process. There may be a series of queues and the success of one queue can be the gateway to another. As for

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example, one person may have to obtain a trading licence before he can ask for a loan. 'First in first out' may not be followed in ordering. Some applicants can be given preference or it may be random. This may lead to take up or avoidance of the service.

8. See B. Schaffer and W. Huang, "Distribution and the Theory of Access" in *Development and Change*, Vol. 6 (2), 1975.

When the applicants are not successful in getting a desirable service they may try to change the final outcome and this is regarded as 'voice'. 'Voice' can be used by correctly presenting a case or by applying the right of appeal when an unfavourable decision is made. Less legitimate methods may also be used, such as political pressures may be created or dissatisfied clients may agitate through political parties. Use of contacts may be another mechanism for obtaining more 'voice'. This may mean seeking assistance of a patron in a patron-client relationship. However, it may be noted that ultimate outcome of bureaucratic allocation of services can be considerably influenced by the use of 'voice'.

There is a larger possibility that rich landholders and the bourgeoisie will command a greater 'voice' in comparison to the ordinary members of the peasantry. Moreover, these better-off groups have friends and relatives in the bureaucracy and they maintain good relationship with bureaucratic structures. Writers like Lamb⁹ said that it is the bourgeoisie who are greatly favoured by the bureaucratic access procedures. Since the state is influenced and controlled by the bourgeoisie they are in a position to alter the rules in their favour.

We may mention that as bureaucratic access procedure considers each person as an individual 'case', it leads to obscure applicants' common class interests. In order to obtain a greater 'voice' the clients may turn to their patrons which eventually weakens class consciousness, minimises the disruption of status quo and strengthens factional politics. However, it can be said that since the bourgeoisie and better-off land-owners are more adept at bureaucratic procedures and command larger 'voice', they benefit disproportionately from bureaucratic access procedures.

Domination of Bureaucracy over Inputs and Access Problems

In Bangladesh, the members of the bureaucracy who are the representatives of different ministries, departments and agencies have

9. G. Lamb 'Marxism, Access and the State' in *Development and Change*, Vol, 6 (2), 1975.

established a monopoly and control over the resources to rural development. They have developed crucial areas of patronage in the ministries and agencies.¹⁰ In this bureaucratic management the rural classes are not similarly influenced. The allocation procedure mainly enhances the strong position of the large landowners and rural entrepreneurs who have necessary educational background and understanding of the procedure and who keep well connections with the bureaucracy and have gained enough experience in dealing with the state agencies and organisations. In the rural economy of Bangladesh, the experience of state intervention is hardly satisfactory.¹¹ State agencies which are responsible for delivering goods and services have been unsuccessful in extending the facilities to the rural poor.

The members of the bureaucracy involved in the rural development projects always try to minimise risk which may hamper their career. Such a tendency is particularly manifested in the case of rural credit programmes. The policy which is followed in lending is that loans can be given to those who have more demonstrable collateral like land. Thus the bureaucracy wants to avoid the charge of fiscal irresponsibilities in the distribution policy by showing that it offers loans to those who are able to repay.¹² The dominant forces in the credit market is therefore the rich and large landholders who because of their position can obtain the biased benefits and also have a part in controlling the institutional sources of credit. The rural poor who can hardly demonstrate any collateral often find problems of access to institutional credit and thus they resort to non-institutional private credit sources.

In rural Bangladesh the mass of the peasantry occupies the traditional position of subjugation. This is true both in relation to the landed rural elite and to bureaucratic state power. The collaboration

10. G.D. Wood, *Class Formation State, Intervention and Rural Development in South Asia*, unpublished Ph.D. Thesis, University of Bath, 1981.

11. *Ibid.*

12. H.W. Blair, "Rural Development class structure and Bureaucracy in Bangladesh" in *World Development*, Vol. 6, No. 1, 1978.

between the urban bureaucracy and the rural rich tends to develop a highly exploitative system. Increasing governmental intervention in the agrarian economy strengthens their cooperation. The cause of bureaucratic collaboration with the rural landed interests can be linked with the social, economic and educational base of most of the members of the bureaucracy. Many of the government bureaucrats have middle class and upper middle class family backgrounds. Therefore, when they go to the grass root level they find it more convenient to interact and communicate with the local rich. Their class position, orientation and attitude—all detach them from the rural poor.

A bureaucrat while posted in the field is often vulnerable to the pressure of local influentials. As he is far from the protection of the rest of the bureaucratic structure, he faces two possible strategies : first; in order to isolate himself from the local influential groups he may resort to a strict form of bureaucratism, and second; he may adapt himself to the local situation and entertain some local interests. In Bangladesh, in rural development projects, a great deal of corruption becomes a common feature as the local level bureaucrat involved in the process of allocating inputs

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or resources adopts the second strategy mentioned above. Most of the poorly paid local officials take every advantage from their beneficiaries. One of the causes of administrative corruption in the rural development projects is that the allocated resources are scarce and are distributed on the basis of selection. Highly subsidised inputs like fertilizer, better seeds or irrigation facilities and their limited supply makes the position of the delivering officials very important and he often uses his position for personal benefit. Better off

peasants in many cases obtain these resources by bribing local officials. The rural political economy is thus characterised by a control of the administrator and the rural rich over the supply and distribution of resources. Only a small number of rural influentials have been able to monopolise the links with the bureaucracy. The poor and the landless on the other hand do not possess the economic means and lack personal contacts with the government bureaucrats and consequently they have access problems in getting subsidised resources and remain outside the benefits of rural development.

Concluding Remarks

We may say that in Bangladesh the bureaucratic type of administration, the high degree of centralisation through bureaucratic control and elite oriented mentality of the bureaucrats are largely responsible for the lack of closer and effective interaction between the mass of the peasantry and the bureaucracy which often results into failure of achieving the objectives of rural development. As the rural clients do not share the bureaucratic rational principles, there exist differences of values and attitudes between the members of bureaucracy and the rural poor. The disadvantaged villagers often encounter access problems because of a lack of knowledge about bureaucratic access procedures. Such procedures, therefore, can not be effective in dealing with the problems of the poor peasants. The bureaucrats in Bangladesh in general, often identify themselves with the urban and rural rich and consequently serve their interests within the framework of bureaucratic system. The ways of administering rural development programmes strengthen the existing rural power structure. This trend also develops collaboration between the urban bureaucracy and the rural power holders. Such alliance is also patronized by the governing elite at the centre who considers it essential for maintaining political stability in the countryside and also for recruiting political support or dealing with probable rural opposition to the ruling regime.