1. Introduction

As far as the existence of vibrant civil society and sustained functioning of a democratic system in the territories comprising Bangladesh are concerned, one is confronted with a paradoxical situation. Bangladesh was born in 1971 as the outcome of prolonged mass movements which culminated into an armed resistance. The people of this deltaic land have been historically very agile, resilient and politically conscious. They have to their credit the record of several mass movements and uprisings which, on the one land, gave rise to sophisticated political consciousness, and brought in major political changes, on the other. On a softer side, the "Bengalis were a unique, distinctive, passionate, and deeply romantic people. Poor in material possessions, they were among the richest in cultural expression of all the people of Southern Asia. Their literature, poetry, music received wide acclaim abroad as well as at home. Bengali pride was pronounced and easily identifiable. And pride translated into cultural nationalism." From these premises, a logical expectation would have been that Bangladesh was endowed
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with a strong civil society and a functioning democracy. What, however, may safely be said is that mass consciousness, peasants uprisings and a very rich tradition of socio-cultural activism have not been institutionalized into democratic norms and behaviours, rule of law, and a just society with assurance of access to basic necessities. That is one side of the story. The other side is abysmal poverty and prolonged records of subjugation and oppression, deprivations to which the common people, mostly powerless, are subjected to almost on a day to day basis.

This is not to suggest that civil society in Bangladesh is non-existent, nor can one conclude that the impressive range of activism of the people at large is of no consequence. Rather the paradox warrants a closer look at the state of civil society in Bangladesh. In particular, what is the nature of inner dynamics of the civil society among its components? Which components of the civil society need empowerment and what kind of empowerment?

The paper makes the argument that empowerment of the civil society should be coming from within the civil society utilizing the vast untapped and unorganized society capital available in Bangladesh. The argument is based on a number of propositions. First, civil society in Bangladesh comprises a vast domain of a minority of very vocal, organized and proactive middle class, at one end and the majority of unorganized masses, at the other. Second, the civil society is segregated along class lines. Third, both the segments are in possession of a vast reservoir of social capital. While the social capital of the elite is well-known and well-circulated, that of the unorganized masses is not. Fourth, it is only when the social capital of both the segments meets the major mass upheaval takes place. But in other circumstances, they are
isolated, unrelated, and hence, of little or no consequence. Fifth, political empowerment of the civil society involves a process or a series of activities ranging from creating political awareness of their rights and duties to the local political process. Through political empowerment, the poor are expected to be able to secure their citizens' rights and perform obligations and participate in movements of social transformation. Since we're dealing with rural poor with an emphasis on women, we would argue that political empowerment would mean an increase of power and control of the poor, particularly women, over their own lives, the rights to address structural inequalities and a systemic bias, and influence wider decision making as a collective force in the society. On the basis of this definition, it will be argued that empowerment is a comprehensive term and different aspects of empowerment—political, economic—cannot be achieved in isolation. In particular, isolated attempts at political empowerment in its literal sense will be of no consequence unless backed by economic empowerment. This conclusion, as far as the title of the paper is concerned, is apparently negative.

A second critique that the paper will offer is no macro politics, because one of the reasons that attempts at political empowerment of the poor by hosts of NGOs is not bearing fruits is that the very political process in the country is contaminated, if not criminalized. That will bring us to the policy part of the paper. It is argued that the ambience and environment of politics at the grassroots has to be changed through two pronged actions. First, one important aim of the pro-active segment of the civil society should be to bring about a fundamental qualitative change in the nature of national politics from 'politics of rejection and hostilities' to
politics of healthy competition. Second, an effective local government system should be evolved.

2. Defining Civil Society

'Civil Society' in Bangladesh's socio-political discourse is a new concept and there is no consensus on its scope and perimeter. It would be pertinent to provide a general definition of civil society. Most commonplace view about civil society is that it comprises of non-governmental, non-profit, non-political organizations and associations that exist to promote multiple interests of groups of citizens. They include organs of press and broadcasting, trade unions, religious, sports, environmental, community, hobby, pastime groups, and other various groups representing such interests as of the aged, the disabled. Viewed in this perspective, civil society can be seen as (a) an element of democratic institution building when it functions as means of ensuring accountability and transparency in the dealings of the state, (b) as vehicle for the exercise of freedom of speech, associations, and information, (c) as influence on the preparation of individuals as informed and responsible citizens, (d) a vehicle for promoting equitable access to resources in society, (e) as a means for researching, discerning, articulating as well as disseminating the impact of certain legislation or executive initiatives on the common people, (f) as tool for registering protests, and (g) as a means of delivering goods and social services.

Another view identifies civil society as citizens, groups and collectivities outside the trio- the state, market and political parties- because these three institutions, collectively or in collusion, tend to monopolize all forms of decision making processes, and the common people have no option but
to accept those as given. Exercise of power, authority and influence of these three includes such vital areas as law making and its application, health, education, employment, production, pricing and distribution, law and order, public property, water bodies, transport and communication, market places. The politics of application of authority in the process of this decision making puts the three forces on one side and the common masses on the other. The society of the common masses is civil society. The concept of civil society has been delineated in the following way:

a. Group, associations and forums as well as individuals like professionals, intellectuals, movements, trade unions, associations and forums of professionals—teachers, journalists, lawyers, development workers, shopkeepers—individuals of all denominations—are parts of the civil society.

b. The common people who are at the receiving end of power and authority and are not associated with or beneficiaries of the power and authority of the state, market and political parties. That is, common people of all strata (1) not directly associated with or employed by the state; (2) not associated with local or foreign capital based enterprises; (3) not associated directly with any political parties.

c. Citizenry and civil society are not the same thing, nor are members of armed forces for their respective loyalties are elsewhere. They may be part of the common people or 'sarbo-sadharan', but not part of civil society. Common people, general mass are descriptive terms, but civil society—like class and gender—is an analytical term, a factor or an element of social stratification that defines position in
production, distribution, allocation and decision making roles in which there are conflicts, contradiction, dependency, exploitation. In the process, civil society ensures accountability and transparency on those relational tendencies.

An individual, a family or an organization may be part of the civil society- organized or unorganized. It may include rural labour, urban slum dwellers, citizen organizations, student movement, women movement, trade unions and teacher associations.

From this definition, certain observations may be made. First, market forces, whose sole concern is profit, are not part of the civil society, rather civil society is defined in juxtaposition to it. Second, political parties are also not part of civil society, rather civil society is defined in juxtaposition to it. What is said in a roundabout way is that the common mass of population- largely unorganized- are also part of the civil society. This issue will be discussed a little later. Before that, a pertinent question is: are the NGOs part of civil society? In this context, it has been argued that whether a force, a group or a social entity will be part of the civil society will depend on the contexts and the functions of that force or entity.

In USA where civil society is defined on paper as non-business and non-partisan in nature, political parties and business associations are considered part of civil society, in Europe also, political parties are part of the civil society. In Latin America and Africa, state and market are outside civil society but their idea about political parties is hazy, not clear cut. But people’s organizations are part of the civil society. In Canada, only very active parts like pressure groups are parts of the civil society. In the Asia-Pacific regions, non-state, non-market and non-party segments are parts of civil society. Not
all the time, all segments are equally active and dynamic. It depends on the legal framework, politics, activities of the state and political parties, behaviour of the markets, and how these impact on the unorganized and common people.

But party in general should not be considered as part of the common people or civil society because its purpose is ultimate authority of the state, it depends on market for funds, it promotes group interests in the name of people, once it goes to power, its differentiation from the state is difficult.

Are the unorganized people at large, who are not part of the trio, nor do they belong to any formal association or forum, parts of the civil society? There are some persuasive reasons why they should be. First, in the context of a developing society like Bangladesh where kinship and traditional social bonds are yet to be transformed into associational relationship, they constitute the vast majority of the population while those belonging to formal associations/forums are a minority. Delineating this minority as civil society is to almost identify it as middle class I a schema of social stratification. Second, it maybe said that the common people, unorganized as they are, possess probably the most vital social capital, resilience and survival capability in vicissitudes. They are agitative in disposition verging on a craving for equality. They are passive, peace loving but takes active interest in things that matter. They are individualistic and can quickly form a curious and if necessary, an active, at times, fierce crowd.⁹

Civil society does not connote any normative behaviour—civil or civilized behaviour. In a society, they are good and bad elements, well-behaved and mis-behaved ones, rich and poor. Therefore, civil society has no relations with civilized,
polished, gentlemen's society (shushil samaj or bhaddarlok samaj in Bengali). But they have a goal of common good-influencing decision in favour of public welfare, making democracy meaningful, asserting their rights, checking or resisting repression or terrorism. There is an element of commonness. But the domain of commonness would depend on the context. What is common for all in one context may look like good for only a group in another. Second, the status of the association or group is contingent on the purpose and activities. When a trade union or an association degenerates into a coercive or extortionist organization for extracting its demands which may be at the cost of the interests of the majority, it loses the commonness of purpose it then becomes part of the establishment or a pole of authority.

The functions of the civil society are the following: (a) Within the civil society, the most active segments, the vanguards undertake discussion, writings, meetings, processions, creating memorials, documentaries, fairs, films, make demands at the same time keep certain traditions, values and memories alive; (b) Activating folklores, folksongs and folk activities as well as the cultural activities of the middle class, (c) links among the segments of working classes; (activism among the professional associations and forums; (d) professional and organizational activism of the common people. Resolving the issues-civic amenities, women repression, educational problems, health facilities, mastanis, price of essentials- these will empower them, activate them; (e) developing certain institutions.

Amidst it, the most vocal section of the civil society is protesting lawlessness, frequent incidence of rapes, giving statements, bringing out processions, writing poetry, staging drama, submitting memorandum, thousands of NGO workers
are staying in the rural areas to promote the standard of living of the poor. They are the vanguards of civil society. They are trying to influence decision making or ensure accountability of the three forces- state, business circles and the political parties- and desire: let the political parties behave, let the terrorists be penalized, let the loan defaulters be prosecuted, let the vested interests inside stock exchange be flushed out, let there be guarantee that the contracts in gas and oil exploration be fair and in national interest, let the TV and radio be autonomous and responsible, let the corrupt in bureaucracy and political be identified and brought to justice, let there be no politicization of the bureaucracy or trade unions. None of these require additional financial investment; only decision making with political good will is enough. The civil society plays the role of pressure groups for this.

3. Civil Society and Social Capital in Bangladesh

3.1 Political Activism of the Unorganized Civil Society in Bangladesh

The purpose of this section is not to make an exhaustive list of activism of the unorganized masses, but present a few prominent cases showing how power and authority are exercised by the state and other agents, how the interests of the poor are affected and how they react when the poor are driven to the wall. Since many of the responses depicted here brought significant changes in social movements as well as in policy, it will be argued that the spirit of spontaneous movement of the common people is a form of social capital that should be articulated and given organizational shape.
3.2 Peasant Protests and Resistance in Land Related Disputes.

Land related violence and peasant's response in Bangladesh has its precursor in the historical *tebhaga* movement.\textsuperscript{11} The rebellion had the following characteristics: (1) in order to realize two-thirds crop share, the militant peasants broke into the land lord's granaries and looted them; (2) The militants used to carry *lathis* (sticks) and red flags while looting the granaries; (3) By 1947, parallel governments had been set up in some places. People's committees were set up to carry out local administration: (4) people's courts were set up for adjudication (i.e. to investigate complaints against local *jotdars*); (5) Intelligence units were formed to monitor police activities; (6) A people's force was created to maintain peace and resist police and *jotdar* 's violence. The members of the force carried bows, spears, lathis etc. Between December 1946 and February 1947 the police and the tenants clashed on at least five major occasions when 31 peasants and police men were killed. In Dinajpur alone 1200 peasants were arrested and 10,000 wounded by police and *jotdars*.\textsuperscript{12} In any case, *tebhaga* failed in the end. But it left a strong tradition of conflict between land owners and rural influentials, on the one hand, and the poor peasants and landless, on the other.

Land related disputes, violence and peasant struggle for access to lands, access to habitat and productive means have been commonplace throughout Bangladesh. About 80\% of the litigations in the rural areas are land-related and the litigations are mostly not civil, but criminal. The influentials and touts in the rural areas frequently resort to land-grabbing activities and in order to bring the poor claimants to submission, they are harassed and coerced through filing criminal cases against them. Land grabbing activities together with violence against the landless and marginal farmers take
place specially in newly emerged depression lands or newly emerged char (islets) lands which in most cases are khash (government owned) lands. The clash over ownership of the khash lands between the landless and the local influentials and mastans seems to have become more frequent and violent. The episode in Beel Khralia where about 1000 landless families of Chatmohar obtained settlement permit from the Government for about 500 acres of this land is an example.\textsuperscript{13}

The most recent have been the events in Badurabad in Debhata Thana of Kaliganj.\textsuperscript{14} About 500 landless families in 9 villages in Debhata have been fighting for their rights over khas lands allotted to them in 1982 following a Supreme Court verdict that the land was khash. However, manipulation was done to declare the khash agricultural lands as jalmahal (water bodies) and then leased to private owners for shrimp farming. Eviction was looming before landless families in 9 villages. The court upheld the lease for shrimp farming during BNP rule. Shrimp farming in the area has already caused extensive damage. The leaseholders mercilessly evicted the villagers in May 1998 killing a landless lady, Zaheda. The landless families resisted but to no purpose. However, plight of the landless and the resistance they put attracted attention of media and the authority. Incidentally, the local people have named Badurabad as Zahedangar, after the slain landless lady, Zaheda.\textsuperscript{15}

3.1.2 Shrimp Violence

In recent years, it is reported that violence in areas under commercial shrimp cultivation has become rampant. In most cases, the aggressors are shrimp farm owners and their musclemen, and the victims are local landless or marginal/
small farmers. The forms of violence perpetrated on the victims included looting, beating and murder. The cause behind this escalating social conflict is that rich outsiders or local *jotdars* (big land owners) want to illegally establish their shrimp farms on *khash* lands allotted to the landless or on lands owned by marginal/small farmers. Antagonism between these two groups also escalated because shrimp farming has various socio-economic and environmental side effects (i.e. loss of soil fertility, increase in salinity, loss of grazing field, forests, bio-diversity). The local poor farmer suffer various economic setbacks (loss of crops and traditional jobs) and other associated problems. These problems are compounded by the local administration and police who protect the shrimp farmers and their musclemen from the law when violent incidents do take place.

Commercial shrimp farming increased tremendously in the early 1980s. Bangladesh began exporting shrimp in the early 1980s and some entrepreneurs realizing the demand for salt water shrimp in the international market started commercial shrimp production. Shrimp cultivation was viewed as high return, low cost investment that yielded a steady stream of foreign exchange. Bangladesh government and development agencies offered various incentives (easy credit etc.) for extensive shrimp cultivation. However, the government did not formulate any national policy nor any legal framework for protecting vulnerable groups or environment. There was no guidelines for monitoring socio-economic effects of commercial shrimp cultivation. As a result most of the shrimp farming is carried out in an unplanned and indiscriminate manner which has had several adverse impact on the livelihood of small, marginal and landless farmers and fishermen. This has also caused long term environmental damage. The entrepreneurs have seized the
opportunity to buy coastal land from local landowners, breaching coastal and river embankments and flooding agricultural land.\textsuperscript{17}

The conflict dimension arises from the fact that the small marginal farmers, fishermen and landless poor have lost their livelihood due to commercial shrimp farming. Water management is crucial for rice production in commercial shrimp farming areas. Because of contradictory water management requirement between rice production and shrimp farming, the large shrimp cultivators (80\% of whom are outsiders) often make decision on water management in terms of when to let in saline water to the detriment of the interests of the small farmers. Increased salinity levels make it impossible for farmers to prepare seedbeds and cause loss of soil fertility. Moreover, salinization of water bodies within shrimp growing polders lead to the total loss of fresh water fishes, directly damaging the livelihood of fishermen.\textsuperscript{18} Further more, local share croppers lose their traditional jobs. Though shrimp farms employ labourers the sector is not as labour intensive as agriculture is (i.e., a 70 acre shrimp farm needs only 5 labourers whereas an agricultural farm of that size would need 50).\textsuperscript{19} It has been estimated that in Dakope thana, Khulna, consisting of 19,664 householders, yearly aggregate loss of income is about Tk. 330,266,270, (that is Canadian $8.25 million) due to shrimp cultivation.\textsuperscript{20} This loss of income is disproportionate among the poor. These economic factors explain why local poor villagers would hold an 'anti-shrimp' position and resent the presence of outsiders/ local shrimp farmers.

The intrusion of musclemen with firearms from urban areas threaten the local people.\textsuperscript{21} Local people feel helpless in the presence of these hired \textit{mastan} and guards. Local women
fear physical, verbal and sexual harassment. In one instance, a woman worker of a shrimp industry was assaulted by male guards (she latter committed suicide).\textsuperscript{22} Antagonism between locals and shrimp farmers has been intensified by the fact that most of the shrimp farmers are outsiders.

3.1.3 Fertilizer Crisis

\textit{Ain o Shalish Kendra} (ASK) [Law and Arbitration Centre], a non-governmental legal aid body, prepared an investigative report in 1996 on the crisis. Corruption among dealers, businessmen, local District Commissioner and other officials, and large scale smuggling have led to inadequate supply of fertilizer in rural areas. Price hikes and black marketeering have eventually caused peasant unrest. According to ASK, in 1994-95, when the fertilizer crisis was acute, 18 lakh tons of fertilizer were needed. Up to March 1995 (during peasant unrest) only 12 lakh 59 thousand metric tons were supplied. In this situation the farmers became restive in North Bengal. The areas that were disturbed in 1995 were: Gaibanda, Mohimaganj, Ghatail, Kurigram, Narsindhi, Kishorganj, Netrakona, Fulpur, Melandah (Jamalpur). Except for Narsingdi, in all the areas violence was perpetrated by the police for 'crowd control' and all these areas had inadequate supply of fertilizer. Only in Netrokona (the peasants looted 3 fertilizer wagons) and in Fulpur the peasants tried to loot fertilizer. In other places the peasants had assembled to buy fertilizer. In Melendah (Jamalpur), the police had forced the Thana Nirbahi Officer (lowest level executive/bureaucrat) to give written instructions to open fire on grounds the people were not standing in straight lines and they had become militant after the police had lathi-charged the crowd.\textsuperscript{23} Only in Faridpur the Magistrate gave an unwritten order to open fire after the mob became unruly. In Gaibanda and Kurigram and
other places the police opened fire into the crowd in order to 'disperse' them. It is evident that the local administration became fearful of the crowd since they argued that the fertilizer supply was inadequate to meet their demand. The peasants resorted to looting only after the local officers refused to sell fertilizer. Furthermore, the display of state violence was blatant because in majority of the cases, the farmers were not militant or armed. The peasants had waited all night in front of godown or local TNO offices to buy fertilizer. Aside from the 18 men who died in 1995, many were unable to file cases. The local administration managed to file 'false' criminal cases against the victims. 24

The fertilizer crisis of 1995 in North Bengal reminds us of the Tebhaga movement in terms of its intensity and spontaneity. Usually, events of this type are capitalized by the Opposition to put the Government in difficulty. But because of the intensity of the widespread but unorganized movement by the peasants, the Opposition displayed significant restraint in protesting fertilizer shortage and supporting the cause of the peasants lest violence goes out of hand.

However, incidents in 1995 did not signal the end of fertilizer crisis or violence related to this crisis. In early 1997, inadequate fertilizer supply in North Bangal, Khulna and Chittagong caused acute fertilizer crisis. The farmer in these regions made agitation, demonstrated and blockaded roads etc. as forms of protest.

3.1.4 Halua Panti Movement in Rangpur: "Stop Cattle Lifting or Give Back Our Mandate"

Villagers in Badarganj in Rangpur have started a novel movement against their elected representatives following a
chronic problem of cattle lifting from the area. The people complained to police as well as local leaders including their Jatiya Sangsad member but to no purpose. Cattle lifting was continuing and the protesters were harassed in false litigation. Police baton charged protest meetings. The people started collecting one lakh signatures in support of their demand for return of the trust and mandate they gave in the local representative. They submitted their memorandum to the Speaker in November.

3.2 Political Empowerment of the Rural Poor, Especially Women by NGOs

In this section of the paper, we are looking at political empowerment programmes of the NGOs for the rural poor with an emphasis on women. We argue that political empowerment would mean an increase of power and control of the poor particularly women over their won lives, the right to address structural inequalities and systemic issues, and influence wider decision making as a collective force in society. Is this true of the rural women in Bangladesh today? Can they participate effectively in decision making?

Background: The movement for the restoration of democracy came to its peak by late 1990 and NGOs declared their involvement in the movement at this stage. What was so long believed happening covertly became overtly clear. The major role played by NGOs in the years following the restoration of democracy began by aligning with the movement and later through various activities with their beneficiaries. They organised awareness raising and sensitisation programmes and other specific activities including mobilisation for participation in politics.
NGOs have long been working for the economic empowerment of the rural poor, poverty alleviation/elimination, saving, micro credit, health and literacy and education. They provided services, awareness and sensitisation campaigns, target group mobilisation, advocacy and lobbying. At one stage they made link between the need for social and economic development of people who have been excluded from mainstream society, as a basis for their active, democratic participation in the political process at all levels of society. The realization was that economic and social empowerment of women cannot be sustained unless women are brought into and made part of the political decision making process. Therefore, a shift or addition was evident in the focus and mandate of NGOs. The NGOs took on programmes for dialogues with political parties, voter education, leadership training, candidate training etc.

The specific activities of NGOs focused on awareness raising and sensitisation on politics and for political empowerment of the rural citizens particularly women.

1(a) Centre For Analysis and Choice (CAC) organized many dialogues and round table discussion with Members of Parliament and politicians as part of their parliamentary advocacy for making Parliament effective from 1991 to '96. They ran for three years a 'Women in Politics' program to raise awareness and develop skills of potential women leaders to enable them to contest as candidate both at the national and local levels. The candidate training offered by CAC was initially for women contesting at the national level but later extended and offered to women candidates of city corporations and other local elected bodies including Union Parishad.

CAC advocates for parliamentary democracy and political empowerment of women. They organised dialogues with
leaders of the four major political parties to share women concern and demand for enhancing women representation and participation. They even linked with the movement in the region of South Asia and beyond for advocacy for greater inclusion of women in politics and in all decision making bodies.

1(b) Women for Women, a research organisation, conducted research on the status of women in politics in Bangladesh, organised a series of dialogues with political parties in 1994 with the intent of sensitising leaders of the political parties to women's concerns and issues. They advocated for the inclusion of women participation in political parties, hierarchy and in the presidium, as well as nomination of greater number of women as candidates in election.

1(c) Centre for Policy Dialogue also organised a few roundtable with political parties based on national issues.

2. Voter Education: Initially on an experimental basis in 1991 by a few NGOs and then on a more planned and larger scale by many NGOs, voter education was undertaken for their immediate and extended beneficiaries. Association for Development Agencies in Bangladesh (ADAB), Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee (BRAC), PROSHIKA, International Voluntary Services (IVS), Centre for Developmenten Services (CDS), Bangladesh Nari Progroti Sangha (BNPS), Ain o Shalish Kendra (ASK) and Nagorik Udhyayan, to name a few NGOs, took up voter education programme.

There has been much criticism regarding the voter education taken up by NGOs. There are allegations made by NGOs against each other. One such case in point is
allegation against ADAB during the 1996 election. At one stage BRAC, followed by some other NGOs, expressed their dissatisfaction and did not identify with ADAB's decision. It was alleged that the voter education by ADAB was in favour of a particular political party.

3. Advocacy and lobbying: NGOs started to offer advocacy training on their training menu especially for women. It aimed at enhancing the ability of women to use advocacy strategically to influence political change. PROSHIKA has institutionalised it and set up a research and advocacy institute under PROSHIKA.

Under the democratic culture that was developing in Bangladesh, NGOs started advocacy and lobbying with policy makers as well as their stakeholders around specific issues. The issues ranged from enhancing women's political participation, reservation of greater number of seats for women in the national Parliament, direct election to the reserved seats both at the national and local levels, uniform family law, violence against women and amendment to the Women and Child Repression Act.

NGOs, such as CAC, UBINIG, BNPS, CPD, Nari Pokkho, Nijera Kori, Mahila Parishad, GSS, Bachte Shekha, to name a few, have been advocating for increasing women's representation in politics. They have been advocating among themselves, academics, activists, and policy makers. There is a consensus that it is important to increase the critical mass, but also improve the quality and monitor performance of the women politicians both at the local and national levels.

4. Monitoring of Election: The practice of citizen group or body monitoring election is a new phenomenon in
Bangladesh. It has contributed to not only awareness and participation of citizens at large in the election process, but to some extent to attempts of accountability by the officials and candidates concerned. The knowledge that organizations like FEMA, ODHIKAR, CCHRB and CAC were monitoring the election led to a degree of cautiousness in the behaviour and conduct of individuals concerned.

5. Training of Elected Representatives: Many NGOs designed specific programmes to train local elected representatives especially women representatives. Khan Foundation and IVS are among those who are imparting the training. The module designed by the Khan Foundation are for short training of one day and five days. The one day training is a rapid training whereby the trainer goes to the field and conducts the training. Khan Foundation claims it has covered ten thousand women UP members till date. Under the long term training, women representatives are invited to Dhaka and undergo a five-day training comprising of sessions on the structure and composition of the local government and the roles and responsibilities of UP members especially women members.

6. Democracy Watch is facilitating the process of developing the common mass into a civil society. It has initiated programmes whereby students and housewives are learning about democracy and democratic institutions and practices. They have a specific project for developing civil society and mobilising them. The members and students of Democracy Watch have conducted opinion polls on topics issues and ran signature campaign against abuse by law enforcing agencies against Rubel, an undergraduate student who was tortured to death in the process of interrogation by police.
7. The women's movement has left a mark in improving the socio-political conditions of the women in Bangladesh since the mid-1980s. They have protested against excesses and violence by the state, society or vested group against the marginalized and the oppressed. The movement has helped create alternative space for women. They have played a significant role in getting recognition for women and uphold the dignity of women.

Unfortunately the impact of the movement is being questioned presently because of the role of certain leaders of the movement. There are allegations of cooption of certain leaders by the state and thereby, creation of division within he movement.

A critical assessment of the activities of NGOs and civil rights movements is in order. There have been much criticism regarding the voter education programmes taken up by NGOs. There were allegations made by NGOs against each other. One such case in point is allegation against ADAB during the 1996 election, as mentioned before. Again there were counter allegations against BRAC, and Grameen Trust. The criticism was that the NGOs were influencing citizens in their exercise of franchise and were also playing a hegemonic role overpowering small and local NGOs. After the elections of 1996, a presentation was organised at the Grameen Trust based on election observations in 8 constituencies. The study was done by Zakir Hossain, Coordinator Nagorik Uddayyog and Mirza M. Hassan, a PhD student, entitled Rural Poor and Electoral Democracy: Reflections of Parliamentary Election of 1996. It was found that citizens voted for candidates based on local considerations and local dynamics. It was also found by the researcher that no direct identification of candidates was made or discussed in any of the voter education programmes
attended by the local people. It is important to conduct further research for understanding any analysis.

The voter turn out in the 1996 election is documented to be 74%, high by any standards. This was made possible due to the voter mobilisation programmes, particularly for women taken up by the NGOs. Media and the Election Commission also played an important role but it was mainly the NGOs that tried to involve the voters especially women. They worked to create a congenial environment with minimal violence so that the women could participate on election day.

An interesting development was the by-product of a process initiated by Nari Pokkho prior to the UN Women Conference of 1995 in Beijing. They organized a workshop with grassroots women and it led to the formation of a network. The network that emerged took on the issue of women in politics and the participation of women in electoral politics. It was need-based and demanded by the women themselves. Since Nari Pokkho has been looking more closely at the issue and have advocated for enhancing women's participation in politics.

The efforts by the NGOs for the political empowerment of the rural poor were strengthened by mobilizing the group members of the NGOs to participate in the UP election of 1997. 700 members of GSS contested in the UP election and 296 or 46% of them were elected.

Bangladesh is trying to institutionalize democracy even at the local level and therefore efforts have been taken to activate the local government structures that have been inactive. The Local Government Reform Commission in 1996 in their recommendations called for an amendment to the Local
Government Ordinance introducing direct election to the three reserved seats in local bodies. It created the opportunity for 44,000 women to contest in the UP election held during 1-31 December 1997. Some 14000 women were elected to the reserved seats. There are 4474 Union Parishads and women have three reserved seats in each one of them. In addition, 17 women were elected to the post of chairperson and 101 women elected to the general seats. This is a critical mass which, if organized, could play a major role in transforming politics at the local level in Bangladesh.

Though constitutional provisions and laws have been enacted to encourage women’s participation in politics, they are still prevented from doing so because of cultural and religious practices. In the UP election there were media reports of how the husband of a woman candidate hid her clothes to prevent her from participating in the election. There were also reports of women being beaten up.

Again the lack of supportive systems consisting of childcare facilities and flexible working hours makes it extremely difficult for a mother of young children or a single woman to be a politician. Politician or no politician, a woman’s domestic role and domestic chores are binding and make it difficult for her to function as a politician or to be actively involved in politics.

*Fatwa* or religious decrees were given against women’s right to vote. Therefore, about 20,000 women were not allowed to vote in Patuakhali. About 4000 women could not vote in Begumganj. But women in Charmonai defied the *fatwa* and voted. Such activism on the part of the women reflected a backlash to decrees that violate the civil rights of the citizens.
To conclude, changes in policy do not necessarily lead to changes in outcome. Policy can exist as an intention, or as a symbol but may never be put into practice. Policies may not be implemented properly at all. The amendment to the Local Government Ordinance had to be implemented, but there are serious hiccups and much needs to be done. The elected women representatives of the UP, both from the general seats and reserved seats have been elected from three wards each, yet the male members have been elected from one ward. What should be the status of the women members? Second, it was proposed that the women members be recognised as the vice chairperson but that has not been accepted.

The women UP members have complained that they are often not included in the decision making process by male colleagues, they are not invited to sit in committees as required by laws, and they are told that there is no clear direction as to the allocation or roles and responsibilities of women members prescribed in the present Local Government Ordinance (Amendment) 1997. The major bone of contention is over resource allocation and development funds. When Women UP members in Godagari protested the misappropriation of funds and relief goods by the Chairman, they were severely assaulted.28

It is now imperative for the government to face these and iron out the differences. Women have to participate in the process of governance, but not as tokenism and maintain the status quo, but to engender change and develop healthy and clean politics.

4. Concluding Remarks
Apparently, there is a lot of activism in the civil society—both at the grass roots among the unorganized masses and more
active sections of the civil society, that is, at the level of the innumerable associations, forums and NGOs. The history of Bangladesh has shown that when they are combined, a transformation takes place. Yet, the conclusion one has to reach is that civil society in Bangladesh is weak, less effective and less assertive. We would argue that lack of interaction, not to speak of collaboration, among various elements—both horizontally and vertically stands in the way. The elements of civil society are segregated. Their activities are overlapping, often competitive.

At a more specific level, certain observations may be made. First, empowerment often threatens vested interests, and such threats often create conflict. Participatory approach will change the top-down policy intervention and the myth of the homogeneous community. It brings to light conflicts of interest at the local level.

Second, in a participatory process there is risk of power getting stuck at every level, often with corrupting outcomes. A NGO official or group member or a university researcher or local elected representative may become elite's representative retaining control over what they believe are community perceptions. A community gatekeeper may be corrupted by the power bestowed through negotiating entry with outsiders. Through the disabling effect of power, limits are placed on the full participation in the policy process of those whose lives are truly being affected by it. There are allegations that NGOs are hegemonic and are not allowing full participation of the various stakeholders or the local community. Is it effective participation? Also, political empowerment to what end and for whom?
Third, there is no scope of disagreement against participation in the political process—both formal and informal—by the common mass, particularly women. Then it is important to ask: what kind of politics they will enter, and the kind of political culture they will adopt. Criminalization of politics is not a new phenomenon, but it has gained momentum in the last decade. Nexus between criminals and politicians, and vested interests of the bureaucracy have distorted the healthy growth of politics in Bangladesh. Therefore, we need to take a step back and question ourselves: whether we want to encourage the common mass to enter the mainstream politics and perpetuate the existing culture, norms and values in politics, or efforts be geared up for political restructuring?

5. Policy Options
There should be linkage, contacts and collaboration at different levels of civil society activities. At the same time, there should be documentation of and support to local initiatives.

Participatory political process within the framework of a decentralized local government system should be established.

Developing a form of linkage between local bodies and the NGOs for need assessment, project formulation, design, managing and monitoring is required. Such formal and structured linkage with the NGOs maybe used as vehicle for capacity building, getting administrative and political support, resolving local level functional problems, and monitoring and evaluating projects.

Efforts are to be undertaken to identify the concern, issues and competence of the young, to support them to organize themselves independently to address these issues, to
develop non-violent conflict resolutions, take innovative initiatives, and to be able to take risk to have ownership.
Civil Society in Bangladesh and its Empowerment

Notes


3. Among others, the debate initiated by the *Bhorer Kagoj* in the wake of the Second Conference of Asia Pacific Civil Society Forum held in Dhaka in mid-1997, is a commentary to that. See, F.R. Mahmud Hasan, "Concept and Relevance of Civil Society" (in Bengali), *Bhorer Kagoj*, 4 August, 1998.

4. This is the working definition of civil society that emerged from international seminar, *Breaking New Ground: The role of Civil Society in Promoting Democratic Governance*, organized jointly by the British Council and One World Action on April 20, 1998 in London.


10. See, Hasan, *ibid.*


12. See, *ibid.*

13. The Association for Land Reform Development (ALRD), Dhaka makes excellent documentation, in its journal, *Land*, published both in Bengali and English, of the land related disputes and the plight of the poor and the landless in such cases.

14. See, field reports in *Janakantha* [Vernacular Daily], June 4,5, 1998. See, also, Rashed Khan Menon, "Halua Panti Diye Rajniti Proshason-keo
Shoja Rakhte Hobel! [Politics and Administration has to be kept upright with farmers’ stick], Bhorer Kagoj [Vernacular Daily], August 25, 1998.

15. See, Menon, *ibid*.


20. *Ibid*.


Summary of the Proceedings

A National Seminar on "Civil Society and Democracy in Bangladesh" was held on 28 September 1998, sponsored and organized by the Bangladesh Institute of International and Strategic Studies (BIISS). The Seminar was attended by about 75 participants from all over Bangladesh, from universities, research institutions, NGOs, the media, and civil and military establishments.

2. The Seminar was inaugurated by the Hon'ble President of the People's Republic of Bangladesh, H.E. Justice Shahabuddin Ahmed. In his inaugural address, the President emphasized that the role of civil society is one of a "watch-dog" over the activities of public functionaries. A strong and active civil society may foster the three elements essential for democracy—accountability, participation and continuing momentum for reform. The President deplored that instead of cooperation to mitigate the sufferings of the flood-affected people in 1998, the ruling and opposition parties blamed each other, "as if the flood has been brought about by some conspiratorial means."

3. The inaugural session was also addressed by Major General Mustafa Kamaluddin, then Chairman of the
Board of Governors of BIJSS. He raised the question whether a coherent and organized civil society has emerged in Bangladesh. Barrister Syed Ishtiaq Ahmed, former Advisor of the Caretaker Government, and currently, Chairman of Bangladesh Institute of Law and International Affairs (BILIA), presided over the inaugural session. In his key-note address, Barrister Ahmed mentioned that the class of the strong in Bangladesh had undergone a metamorphosis for the worse in two most important ways: first, in its class composition, and second, by its criminalization. He called for a national debate as the crying need on the question of political culture currently prevailing in the country. Brig M. Shahedul Anam Khan, then Director General of BIJSS, offered the vote of thanks.

4. A total of six papers covering various aspects of the theme were presented and discussed in two working sessions. The discussions were marked by openness and objectivity. Justice Muhammad Habibur Rahman, former Chief Advisor of the Caretaker Government of the People’s Republic of Bangladesh, gave a valedictory speech at the concluding session, which was presided over by Major General Mustafa Kamaluddin, then Chairman, BOG, BIJSS.

5. The issues that were discussed, highlighted and debated in the first working session were the state and civil society in the context of Bangladesh, civil society and party political process, and civil society and the rule of law. Much of the discussion centred on the definition of civil society. Participants agreed that though it is not possible to have a generally agreed definition, it is necessary to have an operational definition of civil society. Some are of
the opinion that civil society is propped up by the educated middle class which acts as a check and balance between the government and the people. Participants stressed upon the role of the local government, the role of the private sector, the role of the political parties, the assertiveness of the micro credit groups, the role of the human rights activists, the role of the women rights activists and at the top of all, the role of the institutions in strengthening the civil society in Bangladesh. However, some stressed on examining the formation process of social classes in Bangladesh to understand the role of civil society. Mentions were also made to strengthen the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary to make the civil society more effective. A section of the participants held the opinion that “social capital” has to be maximized; unless it is done in Bangladesh, democracy cannot succeed. On the rule of law, it was observed that the custodian of the laws was very much involved in breaking the laws. Ironically, it is noted that the voice of the civil society in Bangladesh is muted. Hence, a greater section of the audience is in agreement on the need for proper articulation of the muted voice. Once it is achieved, both the civil society and democracy will take a strong root in Bangladesh.

6. In the like manner, the Seminar observed that liberal democracy still remains a contested concept. It is understood and practiced in many different ways by different peoples. However, none of the early thinkers advocated democracy as a form of government in the sense that it is most commonly understood today, that is, one which involves some element of participation of all the segments of population in government policy and decision-making processes, even if only through universal suffrage
and regular elections. Lack of democracy in the "economic and social" sphere of the society was not initially a part of this agenda and factors such as the prevalence of economic inequality in a liberal democratic state were indeed irrelevant in the early stages of democratic development. But in the democratic practices of the post-war de-colonized world, together with political democracy (meaning multi-party system), the question of economic democracy has come to dominate the discourse, because of the shortcomings inherent in the traditional liberal democracy. The problem centres on the question of what the institutionalization of "rule of the people" means, or how it can be materialized. Here comes the role of the civil society.

7. However, the Seminar has emphasized that both democratization and civil society have suffered at times at the strong hands of the state in Bangladesh. The main problem of civil society in Bangladesh is that it is partisan and faction-ridden, both in organizational terms and outlooks. So it remains weak, less effective and less assertive. Lack of interaction, not to speak of collaboration, among various elements stands in the way of full realization of the potential of civil society. The political parties have a tendency of violating the civil rights of the members of our society. The frequent changes in the governing principles have created a situation detrimental to the rule of law. The independence of the judiciary is the primary condition for the rule of law, which is far from being implemented. However, the new institutions, such as the Caretaker Government, Human Rights Commission and the Office of Ombudsman will facilitate the rule of law. It was suggested that the NGOs should broaden their concerns from mere 'service delivery'
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to refashion the relationship between the state and the society in favour of the rights of people, to ensure the rule of law.

8. The issue of empowerment – social, economic and political – of the poor, with emphasis on women, was discussed in the Seminar. The question of socio-economic empowerment was looked at from the perspective of the NGO activities. While it was recognized that NGOs by focusing on the poor have brought them into the mainstream of development discourse, the effectiveness of micro-credit in alleviating poverty and their empowerment was questioned. It was also felt that perhaps the NGOs have shifted a bit away from the realm of socio-political empowerment to quasi-commercial ventures like micro-credit.

9. Another aspect of empowerment concerned the question of tapping the vast resources lying among the different segments of civil society, i.e., the spirit of resistance, craving for egalitarianism and the resilience of the poor in survival through difficult times. It was recognized in both the working sessions that the civil society is far from being homogenous. So the need of linkage, interaction and collaboration among all the segments of the civil society was emphasized.

10. The participants of the Seminar also felt the need for restructuring the nature of national politics, on the one hand, and introducing an effective devolution of power through the local governments, so that the grassroots people could effectively participate in the local decision-making process. It is here where different NGOs can work as catalysts, as change agents.
The participants felt that the Seminar was very timely and the debate should continue on specific issues of civil society, democratization and empowerment.