

# **A Study on BRAC's *Palli Shamaj***

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BRAC Research Report



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## ABSTRACT

*Palli Shamaj* is a ward-level organization consisting of representatives from several village organizations of BRAC and outside poor members. The study aims to depict a regional density mapping of geographical distribution of *Palli Shamaj* and their activities and the number of elected *Palli Shamaj* members in union *parishad* elections. Data were collected from 9,440 *Palli Shamaj* from 55 regions of BRAC. The density mapping, measured at different administrative levels, shows that Rajshahi division not only has the highest number of *Palli Shamaj* but also the highest density in proportion to the number of wards. No significant regional variation was observed with regard to *Palli Shamaj* activities in acquiring different types of government services (VGF and VGD cards, old-age and widow allowances) as well as participation in social activities such as participation in *shalish*, conflict resolution, preventing polygamy, and early marriage. It was found that *Palli Shamaj* members have won 13% and 1.6% of the total reserved and general seats respectively. The findings indicate that there is a link between activities of *Palli Shamaj* and the participation of *Palli Shamaj* members in local government elections.

## BACKGROUND

The socioeconomic and political situation of the poor people in Bangladesh – especially in rural areas are comparatively worse. In their daily life the village leaders take advantage of the poor economically, politically, and socially. The poor arguably have no alternative way to stand up for their rights to anybody else as an alternative ignoring the village elite. The power structure in the village revolved around the elite still now. The elite monopolize power by controlling all types of formal and informal institutions in rural areas (Mohiuddin 1990). Consequently the poor are neglected and deprived of the minimum rights as members of the society.

BRAC believes that women and poor must be aware of their legal rights to protect themselves from discrimination and exploitation, and be encouraged to take action when their rights are being violated. To that end, the poor, especially the women, often need external assistance. Individually the smaller groups like village organizations (VO) of BRAC often fail to achieve the objectives mentioned, as their size is not large enough to oppose the dominant forces. This creates the justification for having a bigger organization - *Palli Shamaj* (federation of VOs).

*Palli Shamaj* is a ward-level social organization made up of representatives from several BRAC VOs and outside poor members. Initiated in 1998, *Palli Shamaj* is meant to complement the government's initiative to set up local government bodies at the ward level.

### STRUCTURE AND FUNCTION OF *PALLI SHAMAJ*

BRAC has been working for poverty alleviation and empowerment of the poor. The achievement of these objectives is pursued through its vital organ – the VO. A VO operates through three committees- a) the management committee includes a president, a secretary, a cashier, and two executive members who facilitate social and economic empowerment of the members; b) social action committee consisting of five members who discuss the social affairs and take the decisions for implementation in the monthly VO meeting; and c) law implementation committee.

The *Palli Shamaj* is made up of a group of VOs through which the members aim to achieve awareness of their social and political conditions, increase their ability to undertake and manage social and economic action and the ability to control their own destiny. The broad objectives of the *Palli Shamaj* are to institutionalize the VOs; establish social justice; participate in power structure through the leadership of target group (i.e. those who have less than half-an-acre of land and at least one member of the family selling manual labor for at least 100 days in a year); advocate upholding the interest of the group; and ensure proper use of local resources, and preventing the violation of human rights.

A *Palli Shamaj* may have three to five VOs with five members from each. Thus, it consists of 15 to 25 members. The president and secretary and cashier of the VO management committee, Human Rights and Legal Service (HRLS) or Health *shebika*<sup>1</sup> and male member, husband or close relative of VO member of social action committee, represent a VO to *Palli Shamaj*. The members of the management committee are elected for three years by the

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<sup>1</sup> HRLS *shebika* provides Human Rights and Legal training to VO members and legal service to all villagers.

members of the federated VOs. The president, secretary and the cashier must not be elected from the same VO.

The functions of the *Palli Shamaj* include: 1) developing political consciousness among the members so that they may participate in the local elections and vote for the fittest candidate; 2) joining local committees formed within the ward; 3) maintaining liaison with and availing necessary health related government services; 4) leasing local resources such as unused land, ponds, etc. in the area and converting these to productive resources; 5) managing available opportunities within the ward for the advancement of VO members; 6) raising a fund to cope with emergencies or undertaking economic projects; 7) preserving important documents on land and legal aid; 8) identifying conflicts between VOs, analyzing the reasons for the conflicts, and taking necessary steps to resolve the problem; 9) taking necessary measures to prevent all kinds of social problems (injustice, corruption, multiple marriage, acid throwing, rape, *fatwabazi*<sup>2</sup>, and antisocial activities) within the ward; and 10) participating in the *shalish* to ensure justice particularly to females within the ward.

## OBJECTIVE

Given the important role *Palli Shamaj* plays for the empowerment of rural women and poor, it is essential to analyze its different functional aspects. This study would be a prelude to a more detailed study, which would make an in-depth analysis of the contribution of *Palli Shamaj* in the election process and in creating a functional space for more pro-poor approaches in local governments. Against this backdrop, the present study aims to depict a regional density mapping of geographical distribution of *Palli Shamaj* and the number of its elected members and to make a profile of key activities. As political empowerment of the poor is a core objective of *Palli Shamaj*, the study would place greater emphasis on the participation of its members in the union *parishad* elections.<sup>3</sup> It also aims to explore the association between various *Palli Shamaj* activities and participation of its members in the election.

## METHODOLOGY

Data were collected by mail from BRAC area offices across the country. Except a few areas, *Palli Shamaj* exists all over the country and therefore, this method was considered appropriate to collect data within a short time. The survey questionnaire sought information about all *Palli Shamaj* in terms of their geographical distribution and present cumulative status of the different functions. Furthermore, data on the number of the members contesting in union *parishad* elections in reserved and general seats and their rate of success were also collected. The questionnaire was sent to the Programme Organizer (PO) of Social Development Programme, through the Regional Manager (Dabi), to be filled up with information that was preserved in the register book at his office. Data were collected from 9,440 *Palli Shamaj* from 55 BRAC regions.

The density of *Palli Shamaj* was measured by dividing the number of *Palli Shamaj* in a union by total number of wards within the union. The density of elected *Palli Shamaj* members was assessed by dividing the number of elected union *parishad* members from *Palli Shamaj* by the total number of reserved seats in each union.

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<sup>2</sup> Giving the verdict of a *shalish* based on misinterpretation of religion.

<sup>3</sup> The latest Union *Parishad* elections was held in 2002.

It is worth noting that as the information was collected from secondary sources, the possibility of misreporting or over reporting could not be ruled out.

## FINDINGS

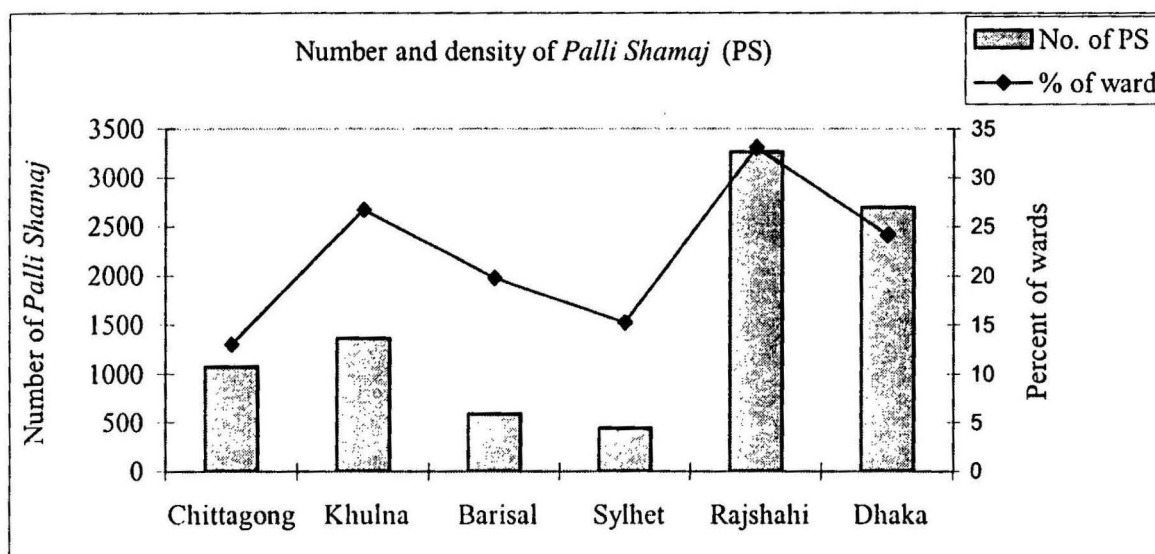
Density of *Palli Shamaj* was explored at different levels such as union<sup>4</sup>, *upazila*, district and division through mapping. Moreover, the present status of *Palli Shamaj* was investigated based on its performance in acquiring different types of government services such as vulnerable group feeding (VGF), vulnerable group development (VGD), old-age and widow allowance, and participation in social activities (participation in *shalish*, conflict resolution, preventing polygamy, early marriage, etc). The study further endeavored to find out the causal effect between performance and participation at the union *parishad* elections. On the other hand participation of *Palli Shamaj* in union *parishad* election was also elucidated at the different administrative level through mapping and other ways.<sup>5</sup>

### GEOGRAPHICAL DENSITY OF PALLI SHAMAJ

The density of *Palli Shamaj* was explored at different levels. It is observed that despite covering all the divisions and almost all districts of the county, the *Palli Shamaj* is present in around half of the unions and only around one-fifth of the wards (Appendix 1). Among them, there are few *Palli Shamaj* at municipal areas as well. In fact, around 9% of all *Palli Shamaj* belong to municipal wards. While the majority of *Palli Shamaj* is operating in rural areas, the study reveals that organization is also actively involved in wards of municipal areas.

The highest number of *Palli Shamaj* was found in Rajshahi division and the lowest in Sylhet division. Rajshahi division also has the highest coverage in terms of wards. Although Khulna division has less absolute numbers of *Palli Shamaj*, it is the second highest coverage in terms of wards. The lowest density is in Chittagong division although it has more *Palli Shamaj* than Barisal and Sylhet divisions (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Division-wise number and density of *Palli Shamaj*



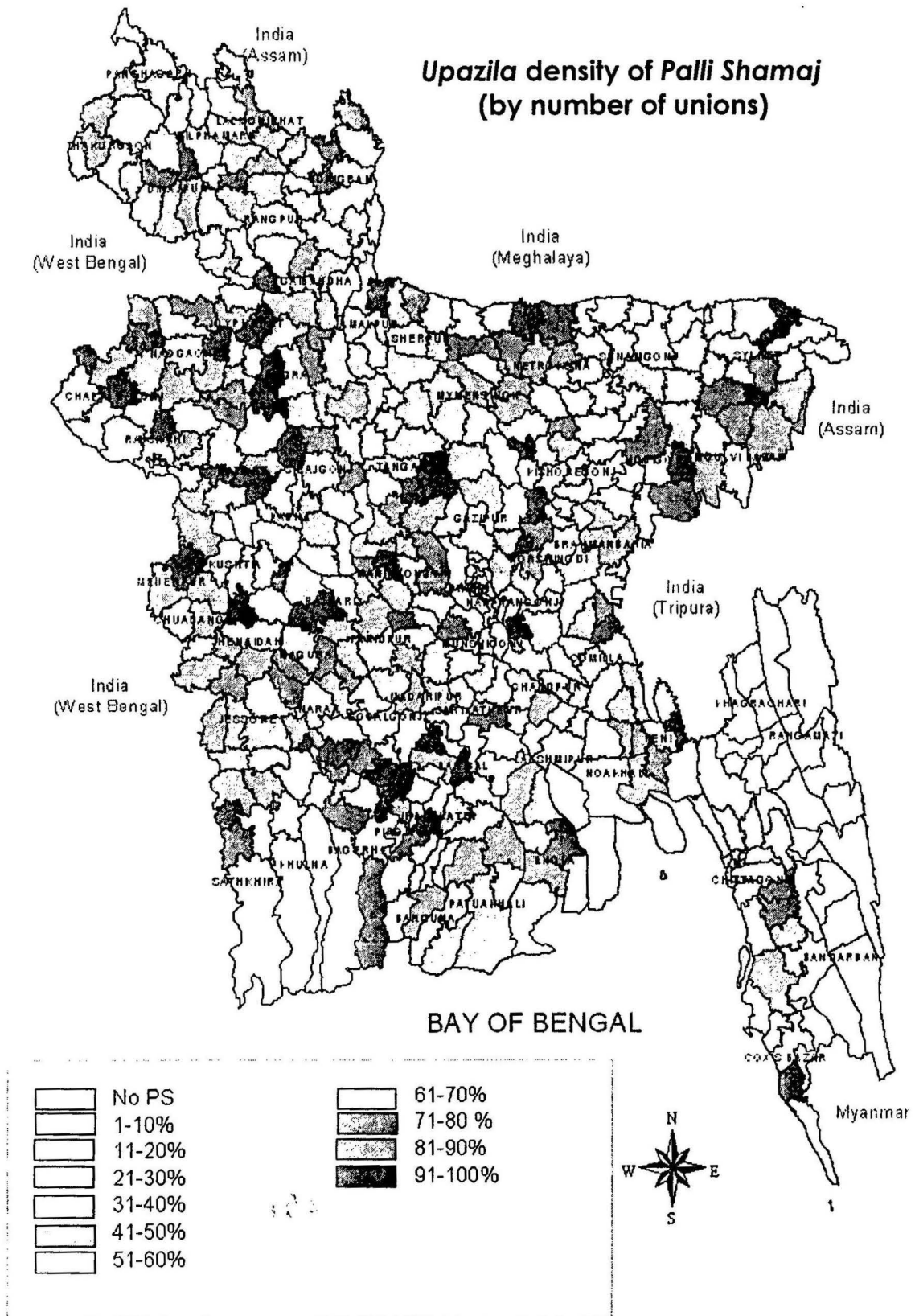
<sup>4</sup> The lowest administrative level of government administration

<sup>5</sup> Due to technical limitation, it was not possible to draw a map showing the participation in general seats.

Density of *Palli Shamaj* was also calculated at the union level. Out of the total 2,540 union/municipality where *Palli Shamaj* is present, 55% of the unions had three or less *Palli Shamaj*. Thirty percent of the unions had four to six *Palli Shamaj* while there were some unions (1.4%) where 11 or more *Palli Shamaj* were functioning (Appendix 3).

Map 1 also presents the density of *Palli Shamaj*. The *upazila*-wise map shows the percentage of unions with *Palli Shamaj* in each *upazila*. Although no clear pattern emerges with regard to this type of density, the presence of *Palli Shamaj* is more apparent in northern and southwestern parts of the country. A major part of Chittagong division, Sathkhira and Khulna districts, haor (an extensive marsh or quagmire) areas of Sylhet has no or few *Palli Shamaj*.

Map 1. Upazila-wise density of Palli Shamaj





## ACTIVITIES OF PALLI SHAMAJ

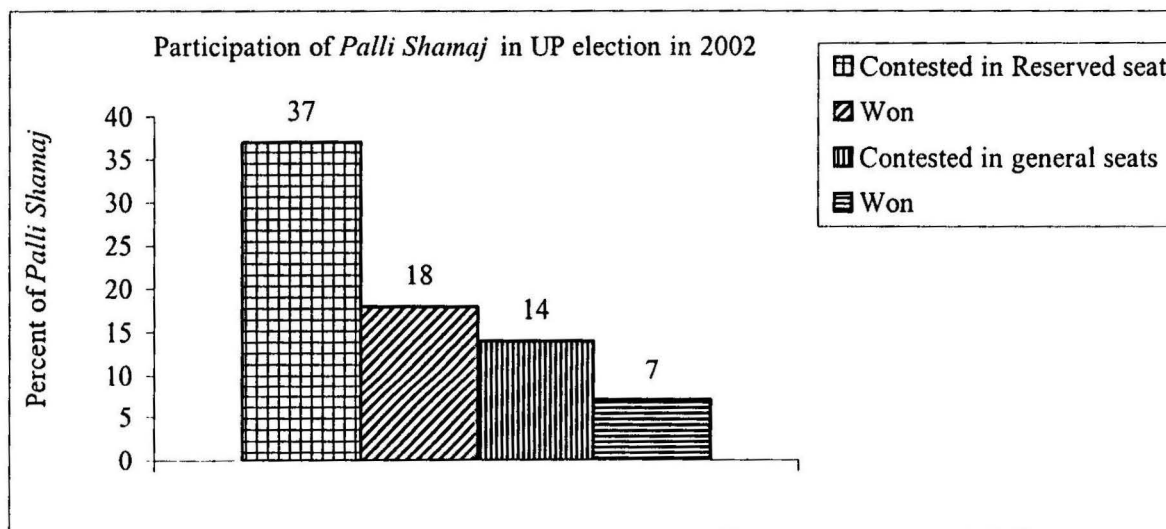
A few indicators such as age, number of meetings conducted by *Palli Shamaj* and available fund had been analyzed (Appendix 4). On average, the age of *Palli Shamaj* was found between 4-5 years. In a year, each *Palli Shamaj* is supposed to conduct six bi-monthly meetings with committee members (committee meeting) and three quarterly meetings with all general members (ward meeting). The highest number of meetings was held in Rajshahi division and the lowest in Chittagong division. In fact, 15% of the *Palli Shamaj* have achieved between 75-100% of the target of holding 9 meetings per year. The figure is much lower in Sylhet and Chittagong divisions. *Palli Shamaj* in Chittagong division has performed the least in this regard (Appendix 5). Another function of *Palli Shamaj* is to maintain a fund called 'emergency fund' to met their emergency needs. *Palli Shamaj* in Chittagong division has average savings of Tk.70 while the other divisions have lower average savings.

The study also looked into different functions that each *Palli Shamaj* is supposed to carry out. This included both acquiring government services like VGF card, sanitary latrine as well as participation in social activities like incidence of mutual cooperation, resolving conflict and participation in *shalish*.

## PARTICIPATION IN ELECTION

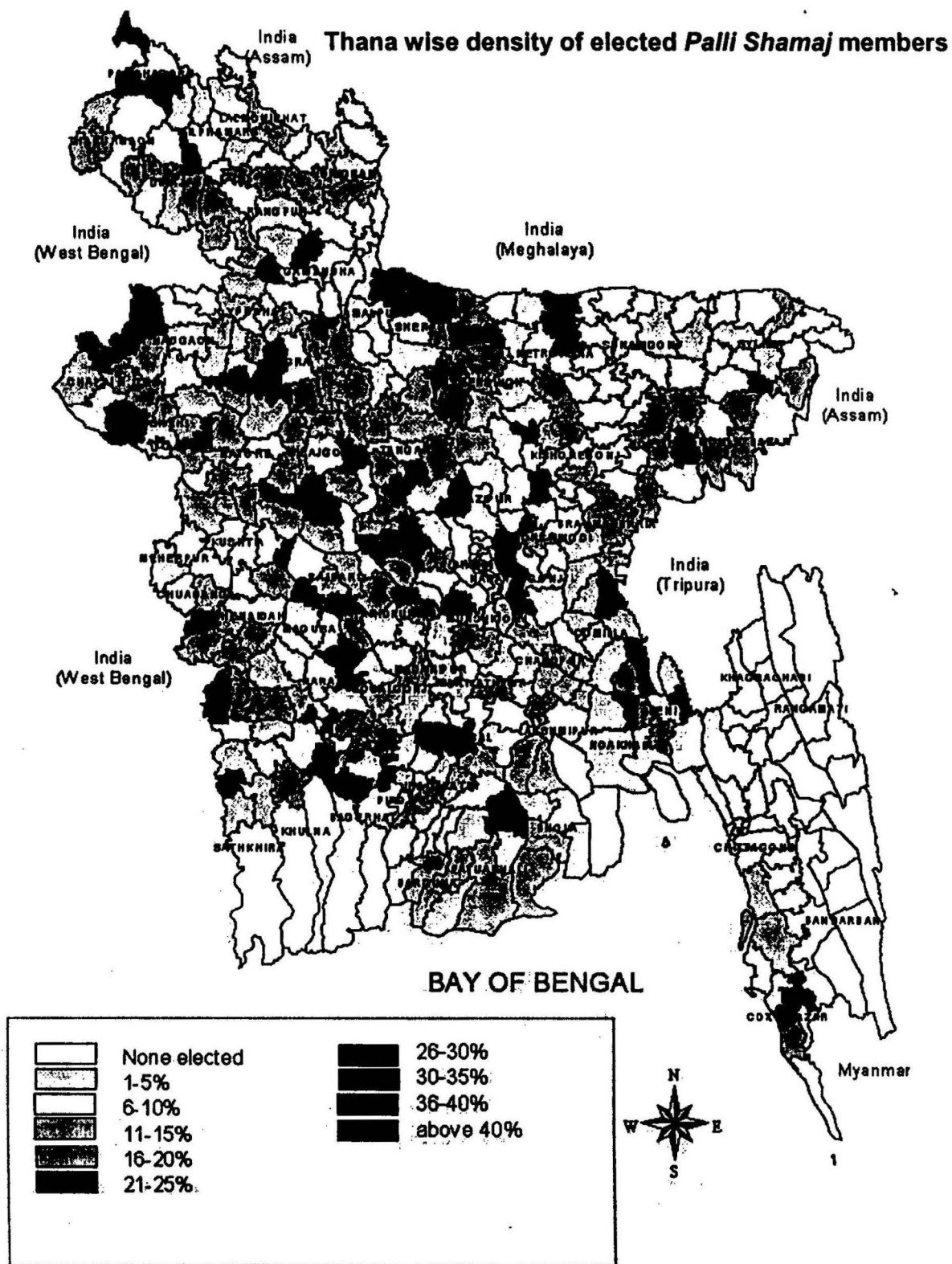
Participation in the rural power structure and the creation of a new cadre of women leaders among the poor are core objectives of the *Palli Shamaj*. The analysis shows that in 37% of *Palli Shamaj*, one or more members contested in union *parishad* elections of 2002 while the ratio for reserved seats is 14%. The percentage of successful *Palli Shamaj* was quite significant (Fig. 2).

Figure 2. Percentages of *Palli Shamaj* in terms of participation in UP election in 2002



The number of *Palli Shamaj* members contesting and winning in elections is given in Appendix 7. In total, 3,993 *Palli Shamaj* members contested in reserved seats of which 1759 won while for general seats the 1555 *Palli Shamaj* members contested and 636 were successful.

Map 2. *Upazila* (thana) density of elected *Palli Shamaj* members as percentage of total seats



Map 2 shows the number of elected *Palli Shamaj* members as a ratio of all electoral seats in the country (Appendix 7). This density provides a clearer picture of the extent of participation of *Palli Shamaj* members in the political process.

Union level data from Population census show that of total union *parishad* seats in the country the *Palli Shamaj* members have won 13% of the reserved seats while it was 1.6% for general seats. The highest density of elected *Palli Shamaj* members, both in general and reserved seats, is in Rajshahi and Dhaka division.

The study explored the nature of the relationship between *Palli Shamaj* activities and participation in union *parishad* elections. *Palli Shamaj* having members who participated and won in election has a higher average in both distributed government services as well as participation in social activities. In other words, where *Palli Shamaj* member contested and won in union *parishad* election the status of services provided and social participation is better (Appendix 8).

To further investigate the issue, we specifically addressed the question to what extent election participation and outcome depend on *Palli Shamaj* activities (election participation as a dependent variable). Findings show that higher level of activities like number of meetings conducted, age of *Palli Shamaj*, VGF cards and sanitary latrines accessed, and prevention of dowry, increases the chance of participation in election. However, there seems to be no association between these variables and being elected. Interestingly, VGF cards, government services accessed through *Palli Shamaj* generally have negative association with electoral participation of *Palli Shamaj* members. The poor are more likely to have access to VGF cards and chances of participation in local government of the poor are much lesser (Appendix 9).

A critical aspect of the study is to probe the positive impact of *Palli Shamaj* members being elected in local government structure. We analyzed whether there are any improvement in distributed services from the government and as a result of *Palli Shamaj* members participating and winning elections (*Palli Shamaj* activities as dependent variable). It was found that total number of *Palli Shamaj* members participating and winning in reserved seats has some positive effect for accessing services like VGD cards, old-age allowance (Appendix 10). This would provide important insights into further research.

Finally, it was observed that the level of participation in general and reserved seats is related- increase in the number of *Palli Shamaj* members participating in reserved seats increases the possibility of its members participating in general seats and vice versa (Appendix 11). However, the relationship between these two categories in election outcomes is not strong. This again reinforces the fact that while participation in elections may depend on *Palli Shamaj* association, election outcome and association with *Palli Shamaj* it is not strongly related.

## CONCLUSION

The density mapping provided a good basis for analyzing regional variations up to union level. Rajshahi division has the highest density of *Palli Shamaj* as well as highest density of participated and elected in union *parishad* elections. There is no significant difference in *Palli Shamaj* functions across the divisions or districts.

The findings underscore the important role of *Palli Shamaj* could play in reaching the broader goals of socioeconomic development. The fact that *Palli Shamaj* members occupy 13% of all local government seats is quite significant in context of BRAC's focus on strengthening women's socio-political status. The decision by BRAC *Palli Shamaj* members to compete in the election may potentially facilitate the process of empowerment. The legitimate entry into the political process can further create a space for sustainable social advancement.

On the other hand, the participation of *Palli Shamaj* members in general seats are quite insignificant. While success in reserved seats for women is noteworthy, greater participation in general seats is more of an indicator of attaining political empowerment. Participation in reserved seats had little impact on participation in general seats.

The study did not find any clear-cut direction of cause-effect relationship between *Palli Shamaj* activities and election participation. Although no strong association between *Palli Shamaj* and election was found, we observe that where *Palli Shamaj* is active i.e., with better access different services and greater social participation, there is more chance of its members participating in election. This may be attributable to the deliberate programmatic effort to pursue a policy of political empowerment through participating in local government structures. However, *Palli Shamaj* membership, or other *Palli Shamaj* attributes seems to have very little or no impact on election outcome— that process is dependent aspects of some other external factors.

## DIRECTION OF NEXT RESEARCH

On the basis of findings of the study, some key questions and directions for further research can be identified:

- Analyze the extent that *Palli Shamaj* actually contributes to political empowerment of the BRAC *Palli Shamaj* members. How or if the process of institutional participation of the poor tilt the balance of power in their favour? The available data can be used to select sample regions on the basis of criteria such as level of election participation, profile of *Palli Shamaj* activities, etc.
- Find out the other “external” factors contributed to the *Palli Shamaj* members’ participation in union *parishad* election. What are the key determinants for the electoral outcome in the context of broader socio-political environment?
- Find out whether and how the elected members were able to create a functional space for more pro-poor approaches in local governments.
- Explore the link between BRAC’s *Palli Shamaj* and capacity building programmes for elected union *parishad* members.
- Explore the link between *Palli Shamaj* and other BRAC programmes. In particular, analyze the scope of incorporating TUP members within the framework of *Palli Shamaj*.
- Find out the reasons for regional variation of *Palli Shamaj* in terms of activities and performance.

### Reference

Mohiuddin KM. Participation of poor in rural *Shalish*: discussion of NGO role. Dhaka: University of Dhaka, 1990.

## Appendix

### Appendix 1

#### Density of *Palli Shamaj* by administrative area

Level	<i>Palli Shamaj</i> present (Percent of total number of levels)
Division	6 (100%)
District	61 (95%)
Upzila	364 (73%)
Union	2374 (53%)
Ward	8625 (22%)

\*There are 815 *Palli Shamaj* in 166 Pourashavas, which is 8.6% of total number of *Palli Shamaj*.

### Appendix 2

#### Division-wise density of *Palli Shamaj* in proportion to wards

Division	<i>Palli Shamaj</i> number (Percent)	Proportion of <i>Palli Shamaj</i> (by no. of wards)*
Chittagong	1073 (11.3%)	13%
Khulna	1366 (14.5%)	26.7%
Barisal	595 (6.3%)	19.8%
Sylhet	442 (4.7%)	15.2%
Rajshahi	3266 (34.6%)	33.1%
Dhaka	2698 (28.6%)	24.2%
Total	9440 (100%)	22%

\*Based on union level data from Population Census 2001, Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics

### Appendix 3

#### Density of *Palli Shamaj* in a union/municipality

Number of <i>Palli Shamaj</i> in a union	No of union/municipality (%)
3 or less	1397 (55%)
4-6	766 (30%)
7-10	342 (13.6%)
11 or more	35 (1.4%)
Total	2540 (100%)

### Appendix 4

#### Some characteristics of *Palli Shamaj* by division

Average	Average age (yrs)	Number of meetings per year	Average fund available (Tk.)
Chittagong	4.86	1.85	70.03
Khulna	5.88	3.98	64.01
Barishal	5.24	3.11	48.52
Sylhet	5.13	2.29	54.28
Rajshahi	5.55	4.26	46.46
Dhaka	5.62	2.04	54.56
Total	5.50	2.25	54.49

Target of number of meeting held (Percent of *Palli Shamaj*)

Meeting	Lowest-25%	26-50%	51-75%	76-highest
Chittagong	74.7% (794)	7.9% (84)	12.0% (128)	5.4% (57)
Khulna	52.7% (715)	3.2% (43)	24.2% (328)	20.0% (272)
Barishal	60.5% (360)	8.7% (52)	18.3% (109)	12.4% (74)
Sylhet	64.3% (281)	10.3% (45)	18.8% (82)	6.6% (29)
Rajshahi	34.3% (1111)	15.0% (485)	29.4% (953)	21.3% (688)
Dhaka	73.1% (1937)	7.1% (187)	9.4% (250)	10.4% (277)
Total	55.6% (5198)	9.6% (896)	19.8% (1850)	15.0% (1397)

## Appendix 6

Some key variables (Percent of *Palli Shamaj*)

Variable	Percent of <i>Palli Shamaj</i>
VGF card acquired	89%
Khas land acquired	3%
Participation in local committee	66%
Meetings arranged	85%
Participated in local <i>shalish</i>	80%
Resolved conflict	76%
Sanitary latrine acquired	83%
Cooperated in dowryless marriage	54%
Incidence of mutual cooperation	80%
Prevented any illegal multiple marriage	41%
Prevented child marriage	58%
Prevented illegal divorce	38%
Went to any govt. office	96%
Succeeded to bring resource person	95%

## Appendix 7

Division-wise electoral participation ratio of *Palli Shamaj* member in reserved and general seats

Name of Division	<i>Palli Shamaj</i> (PS) member contesting in reserved seats	PS member winning in reserved seats (% of all seats)	PS member contesting in general seats	PS member winning in general seats (% of all seats)
Chittagong	437	199 (7.1%)	219	81 (1%)
Khulna	598	236 (13.8%)	202	83 (1.6%)
Barishal	213	91 (9%)	66	29 (1%)
Sylhet	259	95 (9.8%)	53	26 (0.9%)
Rajshahi	1267	580 (17.6%)	349	158 (1.6%)
Dhaka	1219	558 (17%)	666	259 (2.3%)
Total	3993	1759 (13%)	1555	636 (1.6%)

## T-test on services, social activities per year and election participation

		VGD cards	Old-age allowance	Widow allowance	VGF cards	Sanitary latrine
Election participation (Reserve)	Yes=1 No=0 Diff	6.22 4.73 1.49***	2.35 1.79 .56***	1.74 1.29 .45***	4.1843 4.3946 .21	2.0758 1.8160 .2598*
Election won (Reserve)	Yes=1 No=0 Differ	6.69 4.96 1.72***	2.56 1.87 .69***	1.91 1.36 .56***	4.3857 4.3006 .0851	2.2381 1.8390 .3990*
		Participation in local committee	Participation in <i>shalish</i>	Helping in conflict resolution	Preventing dowryless marriage	Preventing illegal divorce
Election participation (Reserve)	Yes=1 No=0 Diff	.4162 .3662 .05*	.7760 .6133 .1627***	.6645 .5681 .0965***	.2951 .2333 .0618***	.1739 .1433 .0306***
Election won (Reserve)	Yes=1 No=0 Differ	.4291 .3748 .0543*	.7655 .6531 .1123***	.6534 .5928 .0606**	.2792 .2511 .0281*	.1721 .1507 .0214*

\*\*\* $P < .001$ , \*\* $P < .01$ , \* $P < .05$ Regression estimates on *Palli Shamaj* service, social participation and election

Independent variables (Per year)	Participated in reserved seat	Won	Participated in general seats	Won in general seats
Constant	0.172*** (7.839)	0.417*** (8.894)	0.0915*** (5.742)	0.419*** (5.845)
VGF	-0.001*** (-3.318)	0.002 (1.368)	-0.001** (-2.287)	0.001 (0.557)
Number of meeting	0.001** (2.355)	-0.002 (-1.378)	1.319 (0.0237)	-0.006** (-3.042)
Participation in <i>shalish</i>	0.031*** (7.139)	-0.005 (-.694)	0.0201*** (6.222)	-0.015* (-1.219)
Sanitary latrine	0.003*** (3.467)	0.003 (1.424)	0.002*** (2.712)	0.009 (1.929)
Dowry-less marriage	0.028*** (3.382)	-0.026* (-2.104)	0.0209*** (3.459)	-0.004 (-0.184)
Going to govt. offices	-0.010** (-2.272)	0.025* (2.277)	-0.006** (-1.795)	0.025 (1.469)
Age of <i>Palli Shamaj</i>	0.033*** (9.568)	0.009 (1.353)	0.007*** (2.805)	0.003 (0.291)
N	9338	3485	9338	1323
Adjusted R	.019	.002	.008	.002

\*\*\* $P < .001$ , \*\* $P < .01$ , \* $P < .05$



## Appendix 10

### Regression estimates on services and election

Variable	VGD cards accessed	Old-age allowance	Widow allowance	Sanitary Latrine
Constant	4.776*** (80.366)	1.781*** (50.568)	1.275*** (59.237)	1.785*** (23.953)
Total number of PS member participated (Reserved seat)	4.776*** (6.760)	0.221*** (3.731)	0.222*** (6.131)	0.010 (.081)
Total number of PS member elected (Reserved seat)	.675*** (7.287)	0.476*** (5.250)	0.341*** (6.187)	0.364* (1.909)
Total number of PS member participated (General seat)	1.109 (-.874)	0.0881 (1.086)	0.014 (.283)	0.302* (1.767)
Total number of PS member participated (General seat)	-.120** (2.180)	0.321** (2.310)	0.361*** (4.246)	0.103 (.352)
N	9435	9435	9435	9342
Adjusted R squared	.026	.013	0.024	.001

\*\*\*  $P < 0.001$ , \*\*  $P < 0.01$ , \*  $P < 0.05$

## Appendix 11

### Pearson correlation- participation in general and reserved seats

	Total number of <i>Palli Shamaj</i> members contested in reserved seats
Total number of PS members contested in general seats	.180**
Total number of PS members elected in general seats	.059**

N = 9,440, \*\*  $P < 0.01$