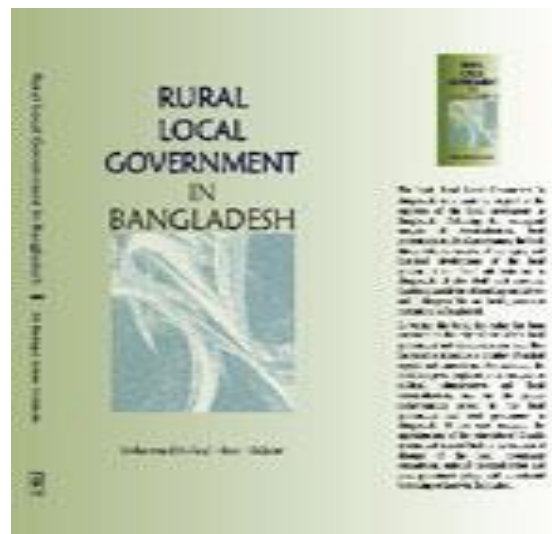


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## Democratic decentralisation and local government

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Audity Falguni made a splendid review of the first edition of the book titled RURAL LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH. The book was first published in September 2009. The previous reviewer termed the local government the linchpin of good governance for any modern state, specifically in its efforts to attain political, economic and social welfare for the marginal groups of the people. The reviewer also focused on the fact that the reasonable gap between the stance of the political community and the civil society's propagation of democratic decentralisation had been getting widened, which needed to be bridged through sincere and strengthened academic efforts.

The second edition of the book, published in July 2013, attempts to make an appraisal of the evolutionary background of the local government in Bangladesh. Here the writer underscores the concern over the absence of the local government commission, the nationally decentralised local governance policy and the sub-national borrowing authorities in Bangladesh. The book takes a deep look at the exposure of the local government in Bangladesh. While writing, the author has

been conscious of his original aim of the local government and decentralisation, and, thus, has tried to introduce a number of critical aspects and innovations. For instance, the book has laid emphasis on the analysis of political, administrative and fiscal aspects of local governance, and also of gender mainstreaming aspects in the local government and local governance in Bangladesh.

The author points out that presently in developing countries, including Bangladesh, the transitional step towards democratisation has coincided with the decentralisation of the state structure and functions, and with public management reform initiatives both at national and local administration levels. Furthermore, the author argues that the contemporary world is experiencing profound changes in the local government as well as local governance, which aims to strengthen the local government as a body corporate and thus to go along the local economic activities.

Importantly, the author has elucidated the present paradigm of decentralisation and local governance in Bangladesh. The current paradigm for decentralisation in Bangladesh is, of course, democratic decentralisation. The author has rightly identified that democratic decentralisation goes deeper than the devolution does into the matters of autonomy, responsibility and accountability of the local authority, and participation, opportunity and emancipation of the people. A full-fledged democratic decentralisation not only creates the environment for wider participation, social inclusiveness and for citizens to demand accountability of local authority, but also generates a sense of transparency and accountability of the country's political system and government. Two interlinked and inevitable components of this latest form of decentralisation are structural decentralisation and institutional democratisation.

The author here refers to Hicks and Kaminski and Rainey: Structural decentralisation refers to devolution in the organisation and relationship of government units, in relation to one another including a shift of production and provision functions to more localised government units (Hicks and Kaminski, 1995; Rainey, 1997). The author adds that structural decentralisation stresses the balance of exercising power among levels of government favouring the localised levels of the government; even to some extent this component allows local people's representatives to govern the local government, but the values associated with legacy do not always change until they get in touch with institutional democratisation. The writer has also turned to Hodgson, McGill and OECD: Institutional democratisation refers to this shift in values, rules, skills, and interactions, favouring transparency, equity, responsiveness, accountability, and other traditional democratic values (Hodgson, 2006; McGill, 1997; OECD, 1996). Evidence of institutional democratisation can be found through functioning oversight and accountability mechanisms and the systematic incorporation of public input into government decision making (Coston, 1998; Klingner, 1996).

The author, however, in response to this decentralisation, shows evidence of global failure and success stories. For instance, Crook and Sverrisson (1999), cited by Eckardt, 2008, provide evidence that despite extensive strides in the devolution of authority and resources to democratically elected local governments, decentralisation in Colombia, West Bengal and Brazil has achieved little in improving service delivery; while Grindle (2007) notes down that local

officials were lauded for the innovations they had introduced in the governance of their communities and the new spaces they created for civic participation. In some cases, governments became world famous for such innovations, as did Porto Alegre, Brazil, when it introduced participatory budgeting process. In Mexico, cities such as Monterrey, Leon, and Aguascalientes became well-known models for efficient and responsive governance. In municipalities in Kenya, India, the Philippines, South Africa, and elsewhere, citizens shared information, made decisions about resource allocation, monitored policy implementation, and envisioned improvements that would alter the future of their communities.

The author further points out that Sirajganj in Bangladesh is also noted for the local governance development that has resulted from Sirajganj Local Governance Development Fund Project (SLGDFP). The experience of Union Parishads' Governance in Sirajganj has been exercised in unions all over Bangladesh through the Local Governance Support Project (LGSP), with special emphasis on the unions of six districts (Sirajganj, Barguna, Feni, Narsingdi, Habiganj and Sathkira) through LGSP-LIC.

The author elucidates that despite the fact that democratic decentralisation can be conducive to poverty reduction through a rights-based approach, for a country like Bangladesh the key likely challenges are marginalised population, lack of local resources, materials, finance, expertise and competent leadership. Yet, there is evidence that democratic decentralisation provides the environment for wider participation and social inclusiveness. This is also an opportunity to meet the public aspiration for rule of law and eradicating corruption. Establishing the rule of law and corruption-free delivery of public goods and services are basically parts of the universal human rights. Talukdar (2009) points out that the rule of law and a corruption-free politico-administrative culture ensure secure and standard living. On the other hand, corruption not only erodes trust in government and democratic institutions, but also discourages investment, forces cutback in economic growth and development, and facilitates crime and terrorism.

The author argues that developing political capacity of the local electors for demanding accountability, and engaging local authorities towards human rights and freedom from poverty are apparently ways to ensure the sustainable democratic and economic development of the country. Nonetheless, in Bangladesh, like in many other developing countries, the decentralisation, by itself, will not unleash the potential of good governance at the local level to meet the development goals, basically getting people free from poverty and their entitlement to human rights, unless it addresses the factors that could turn these potential into reality. Regardless of the fact that inefficiency, lack of resources and finance remain daunting issues, these alone are not the crucial factors for the success of decentralisation in Bangladesh and elsewhere; the most crucial part is changing the behaviour and institutionalising decentralisation with democratic values.

The author has referred to Ugandan and South African successes with local governance development, where political authorities passed statutory and constitutional guarantees for local government development just 17 years back; but now both countries are noted as examples for democratic development of local government. In our Constitution, for decades there have been certain provisions for development of authority and democratic participation at the local government level. Until the recent development, no government has taken attempts to give the

idea a pragmatic shape.

The author has also acknowledged that the upazila election in early 2009 was a milestone in democratic decentralisation that is indeed a cornerstone of the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh. He further observes that until the recent developments in democracy and decentralisation, the Union Parishad, to some extent, was the only devolutionary decentralised stage in the rural local government in Bangladesh.

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