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Evolution of Village Social Order in Rural Bangladesh: A 50-Year Analysis

Mirza Hassan, Syeda Salina Aziz, Asif Shahan,
Aishwarya Sanjukta Roy Proma, Jahid Nur,
Sumaiya Tasnim, and Raihan Ahamed

BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD)
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Chapter One

Introduction

Bangladesh has predominantly been an agricultural society, with villages at the centre. Over the last few decades, the villages have significantly evolved. While the context and extent of the changes have varied across villages, the broad nature of these changes has remained consistent. The transformations in economic dimensions are well documented, including agricultural modernization, increased productivity, and a shift in labour from farm to non-farm sectors, ultimately contributing to higher wages and reduced poverty (Hossain et al., 2013). Resultant shifts in consumption patterns and the composition of the food basket have led to improvements in food security, education, and access to healthcare (Hossain, 2010). Alongside these economic transformations, social orders have undergone significant changes, frequently adjusting to national political dynamics, policy reforms, and broader economic shifts. The rural power structure, as identified by Lewis (2008), has been “far from static,” and the evolving power structure highlights a gradual decline in the role of land-based elites and the emergence of new elites with

alternative economic sources (Bode, 2002; Lewis, 1991; Wood, 1999). Last but not least, factors such as the explosion of the non-governmental organization (NGO) sector, large-scale overseas migration, digitalization, and climate change have profoundly reshaped the villages of Bangladesh, especially since the beginning of this century.

Villages as a research focus received high priority during the 1970s. This focus waned over time, particularly in the post-2008 period, a time when the country also began to face a serious political setback and came under dominant party rule for the next 15 years. The altered political context had a profound impact on policy, governance, and sociopolitical processes at both national and local levels.

In this context, the BRAC Institute of Governance and Development (BIGD) took the initiative in 2023 to study the major changes in the villages of Bangladesh, particularly over the past 25–30 years. The broad Changing Village study encompasses seven thematic areas:

culture, migration, climate change and environment, built environment, financial inclusion, agriculture, and social and political order. The detailed context of the Changing Village study, its methodology, sampling, and the description of the sample villages can be found in the paper, **গবেষণা প্রারম্ভিকা গ্রাম পরিবর্তন: প্রেক্ষাপট ও গবেষণাকৌশল**

This working paper is based on research conducted under the social and political order theme. Specifically, it examines the transformation of social and political orders in Bangladeshi villages in recent decades. It analyzes the evolution of formal governance structures of local governance in Bangladesh, the relevant changes in village governance processes, shifts in village-level politics, and the evolved nature of community governance and power dynamics in the villages. While the primary focus of the study is on the changes that occurred in the post-2000 era, we also provide a historical narrative of changes since the 1970s.

The first chapter of the paper presents the introduction and methodology, while Chapter 2 offers an overview of the policy changes regarding the local government system over the past 50 years. The findings are discussed in Chapters 3 to 5. Chapter 3 presents the transitions in formal governance structures and the dynamics of citizen relationships with local government, Chapter 4 explores the shifts in party political dynamics, and Chapter 5 discusses community governance and changes in power structures. Chapter 6

concludes the paper.

1.1. Methodology

The unit of this study is the village. Villages in Bangladesh are not administrative or legal entities; rather, they are socially defined (Arthur & McNicoll, 1978; Bertocci, 1970). The nature of rural settlements in Bangladesh is primarily land-based, whereas the social basis of community organization is the homestead-based patrilineal kin group. A village is the “cluster of homesteads belonging to each lineage ... the member of the dominant lineage exercise power and control over the community” (Jahangir, 1982). The village unit, in many cases, may or may not correspond with the mauza, set up in the 19th century, defining a revenue unit as a village (Arthur & McNicoll, 1978; Barman, 1988). In this study, we use the traditional social definition of a village. Since villages do not constitute a direct administrative unit, they are governed under the Union Parishad (UP), which is the lowest tier of local government. Typically, villages are represented as wards¹ within a UP, and nine wards constitute one UP. The UP is also discussed in this paper as a local government unit due to its close political connection to village governance.

As this research provides an account of 50 years of village life, it draws heavily from past literature, including journal articles, books, and academic reports dating from the 1970s to the present. To this end, we searched for relevant literature in both online and offline libraries using several keywords, including rural class formation,

¹ Sometimes a village, if big, has two wards.

local governance, power structure, elite formation, gender, conflict resolution, political party, local government, local government election, and village politics. In addition to online sources, we explored the major archives of the Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS), the Central Library of the University of Dhaka, and the seminar libraries of various departments at the University of Dhaka. After thoroughly reviewing the book lists, we shortlisted approximately 75 books. We borrowed and scanned old books, purchased new ones, and downloaded articles to create our own archive, which was crucial for this exploration. We then skimmed the documents and highlighted important sections, which were subsequently reviewed in detail. Sections were marked based on keywords such as local governance, service delivery, and village politics.

Primary data were collected through fieldwork conducted in eight villages across eight districts in Bangladesh. Data collection took place in phases. This study is part of the broader Changing Village study, which aimed to understand overall changes in villages over the past 25 years, with a particular focus on cultural shifts, changes in the village social order, climate change, agriculture, digital financing, migration, and politics and governance. Data collection for this project involved semi-ethnographic research, in which a group of field researchers resided in the eight villages for three months to collect data on each selected topic. In addition to observing the everyday life of

the communities, the field researchers conducted repeated interviews with selected households and in-depth interviews (IDIs) with local elites and local government representatives on issues pertinent to the politics and governance theme.

The first phase of interview notes provides a detailed account of the selected themes, which were useful in developing a broad understanding of the relevant issues. Based on these notes, the research team identified follow-up questions to further explore the issue of social and political order in the villages. Two villages were selected for the second round of data collection focused on the evolution of the villages' sociopolitical order. These two villages were chosen for their diversity, including location (one in Cumilla and the other in Jamalpur), the political orientation of the constituencies (one being a long-term supporter of the previous ruling party and the other strongly supporting the opposition), and migration profiles (one being migration-prone and the other not). The second round included IDIs with political elites, such as current and former UP chairpersons and members, UP secretaries, Union Digital Centre (UDC) entrepreneurs, female UP members, political party leaders from both ruling and opposition parties, and social elites, including *matbors*,² former local government representatives, and teachers in these villages. A few group interviews were also conducted to better understand the dynamics of change in the villages.

² Village headman.

1.2. Study Sites

The villages included in the study are geographically diverse and span various administrative divisions of Bangladesh. This research covers eight villages from eight different districts. Among them, the villages from Lalmonirhat and Shariatpur districts are the largest, due to their administrative boundaries. These two villages comprise two wards each, while the remaining villages comprise one ward each.

The demographic and socioeconomic profiles of the eight villages vary significantly. One village stands out as the largest, with 1,200 households and a population of 16,000, comprised entirely of Muslim residents, and a notable 95% education rate (see Table 1.1). In contrast, another village has the smallest population, with only 120 households and 485 residents, who are 100% Hindu, yet also have a high 95% education rate. A detailed profile of the villages included in this study is provided in Table 1.1 below:

The population distribution across various age groups reveals notable demographic patterns, with significant variation among the villages. Village B has the highest percentage of young individuals, with 50% of its population aged 0–20 (see Table 1.2), while Village G has the lowest, at only 17.32% in this age group. Village M has the highest proportion of middle-aged individuals, with 65% aged 20–50, whereas Village A has the lowest, at 31.6%. Village P has the highest proportion of the elderly population (aged over 50), at 23.33%, while Villages B and M both have the lowest, at only 15% in this age group.

Table 1.1. Socioeconomic Characteristics of the Selected Villages

Village	Household	Population	Voter	Male (%)	Education (%)	Major religion
Village A	552	2,728	1,694	50	65	100% Muslim
Village B	300			55		100% Muslim
Village G	120	485		50	95	100% Hindu
Village M	230	1,000	725		70	97% Hindu
Village N	1,200	16,000		60	95	100% Muslim
Village P	480	3,000	1,700		80	100% Muslim
Village K	400		2,100	50		
Village R	175	1,000	575	48	80	

Table 1.2. Age Group (%)

Village	0–20	20–50	50+
Village A	47.5	31.6	20.9
Village B	50	35	15
Village G	17.32	82.68	
Village M	20	65	15
Village N	30	50	20
Village P	43.34	33.33	23.33
Village K			
Village R	30	50	20

Residents across the eight villages are engaged in a variety of economic activities. Agriculture plays a significant role in

Villages A, M, K, and R, where residents are primarily involved in crop cultivation and fishing. In contrast, Villages B, N, and P have a significant presence of international migrants, accompanied by high unemployment rates (see Table 1.3). Village G leads in service sector employment—both public and private—with 30% of its residents employed in these sectors, whereas Village N records the lowest, with only 2.5%. Additionally, the research identifies a range of other occupations among residents, including business ventures, day labour, and motorcycle taxi driving.

Table 1.3. Occupations (%)

Village	Agriculture	Business	Service	Labour	Migrant	Drivers	Unemployment	Others
Village A	80	5	4	8			2	1
Village B	12.49	4.58	10.41	6.24	52.04		8	6.24
Village G	24	15	30	15			14	2
Village M	51	10	12	5	1	17	5	1
Village N	10	10	2.5		25		50	2.5
Village P	11.96	20	4.78	5.98	35.89	11.96	2	7.43
Village K	92.01	1.57	2.82		2.35		1.25	
Village R	64.51	5.38	4.3	16.13	4.3		5.38	

Chapter Two

Major Markers of Change in Local Government in Bangladesh

The period following Bangladesh's independence in 1971 witnessed significant efforts to reform local governance. The Bangladesh Local Councils and Municipal Committees (Dissolution and Administration) Order of 1972 aimed to dissolve existing local government councils across the country (Government of Bangladesh, 1972). Union Councils were renamed Union Panchayats, and their functions were temporarily entrusted to committees appointed by Sub-Divisional Officers (SDOs), with local Union Agricultural Assistants or Tahsildars acting as administrators (Government of Bangladesh, 1972). In June 1973, Parliament changed the name to Union Parishads (UPs) (Government of Bangladesh, 1973). Each UP was divided into three wards, with three elected members per ward, alongside a chairman and vice-chairman.

The Local Government Ordinance of 1976 introduced a three-tier rural local government structure comprising UPs,

Thana Parishads, and Zila Parishads, with UPs playing a pivotal role (Government of Bangladesh, 1976). Each UP consisted of 12 members, including two women, and was headed by a chairman. Although the chairman held executive powers, the central government retained significant authority through SDOs, who could override UP decisions (Siddiqui, 2005). After 1975, President Ziaur Rahman initiated a decentralization strategy by establishing Gram Sabhas (Village Councils), aiming to empower communities through representation from varied social backgrounds (Huque, 1985). The Swanirvar Gram Sarkars emerged as part of this effort. In 1977, Ziaur Rahman emphasized integrating UPs with Swanirvar committees (Siddiqui, 1994). However, in October 1978, the Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development and Cooperatives dissolved the Gram Sarkars, disrupting local governance. By June 1980, Parliament formally re-established them as Swanirvar Gram Sarkars. These bodies, led by a Gram Pradhan and composed of 11

members, were tasked with resolving local issues, ensuring law and order, promoting family planning, and increasing food production (Huque, 1985).

The Local Government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganization) Ordinance of 1982 marked a significant reform by replacing the Thana Parishad system with the Upazila Parishad (Government of Bangladesh, 1982). Under this ordinance, the upazila chairman became the principal authority for local governance. The former thanas (police stations) were upgraded to upazilas (sub-districts), with councils formally known as Upazila Parishads (Government of Bangladesh, 1982).

In 1985, Bangladesh held its first-ever Upazila Parishad elections. During these elections, the chairman of the thana-level council was directly elected. This shift empowered local leaders to shape their communities. Unlike the previous system, where bureaucrats held more control, the new electoral process made local leaders accountable to their electorate. However, the electoral system primarily represented the wealthiest and most influential members of society, such as rural elites.

In 1991, the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government promulgated the Local Government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganization (Repeal) Ordinance 1991. Under this ordinance, the Upazila Parishad system was replaced by the Thana Development Coordination Committee (TDCC), aiming to coordinate development efforts at the

thana (sub-district) level with an emphasis on administrative efficiency. This change created scope for strong bureaucratic control at the local level.

In 1996, the Awami League government, led by Sheikh Hasina, introduced a comprehensive local government structure of Gram/Palli (Village) Parishads at the village level. These local bodies were responsible for grassroots governance. The government also enacted the Upazila Parishad Act 1998 to reintroduce the upazila system. Under this Act, however, Members of Parliament (MPs) were given an advisory role in the Upazila Parishads, which raised questions regarding centralized control over local government decisions and activities. When the BNP returned to power in 2001, they reintroduced the Gram Sarkar. Each Gram Sarker represented one or two villages, encompassing approximately 3,000 people on average. The elected member from the ward (UP member) served as the chairman of the Gram Sarker. Although the introduction of Gram Sarker aimed to empower local communities and promote grassroots governance, ensuring effective representation and addressing local issues remained critical challenges during this period.

However, in August 2005, the High Court of Bangladesh declared the Gram Sarker Act 2003 unconstitutional, stating that it violated several fundamental provisions of the Constitution, including Articles 7, 9, 11, 59, and 60, which pertain to the principles of democracy and the structure of local government. The court observed

that the Gram Sarker system lacked the characteristics of an administrative or local government body and was contrary to the spirit of the Constitution (bdnews24.com, 2005).

In 2007, the non-party caretaker government introduced the Local Government (Upazila Parishad) Ordinance 2008. This ordinance repealed the Upazila Parishad Act of 1998 and brought significant changes to the Upazila Parishad system, notably removing MPs from their advisory roles. Subsequently, in April 2008, the caretaker government formally abolished the Gram Sarker system through the enactment of the Gram Sarker (Rescission) Ordinance, 2008 (The Daily Star, August 2008).³

Between 2008 and 2013, the subsequent Awami League government retained the existing three-tier structure of local government bodies: (i) UP, (ii) Upazila Parishad, and (iii) Zila Parishad. However, the new government revoked the Upazila Parishad Ordinance 2008. In April 2009, the Parliament passed the Upazila Parishad Amendment Bill. Despite protests from newly elected UP chairpersons and vice-chairpersons, MPs were retained as advisers to the local government bodies. This arrangement aimed to balance political representation with administrative expertise (The Daily Star, 2009). Nonetheless, the inclusion of MPs as advisers raised questions, as their influence often conflicted with the authority of elected representatives and intensified factionalism, particularly

where local elites aligned themselves with MPs.

The period from 2014 to 2018 witnessed both structural changes and heightened political tensions in Bangladesh's local governance. On 12 October 2015, a paradigmatic shift occurred when the Cabinet decided, for the first time, to hold local polls on a partisan basis. Candidates in local government elections would now contest under party banners, replacing the previous practice of non-party-based elections. This transformation, as Shahan (2021) observes, fundamentally altered village electoral dynamics. Political symbols permeated local contests, intensifying rivalries and increasing central party influence in grassroots institutions. Whereas UP elections had previously focused on local service delivery, they now became arenas for national party competition.

A close analysis of the evolution of local government in Bangladesh, as outlined above, reveals a consistent pattern: structural reforms have primarily served political objectives rather than advancing genuine decentralization. Four interlinked characteristics underpin this trajectory and have profoundly shaped the sociopolitical landscape of rural Bangladesh.

First, reforms in local governance have been highly politicized. Throughout both authoritarian and democratic periods, ruling regimes have instrumentalized local bodies to consolidate political control. Authoritarian leaders such as Ziaur Rahman and H.

³ <https://a2i.portal.gov.bd/union-digital-centers-digitizing-bangladeshs-grassroots/#:~:text=The%20Honorable%20Prime%20Minister%20officially,the%20UDCs%20increased%20to%20270.>

TIMELINE

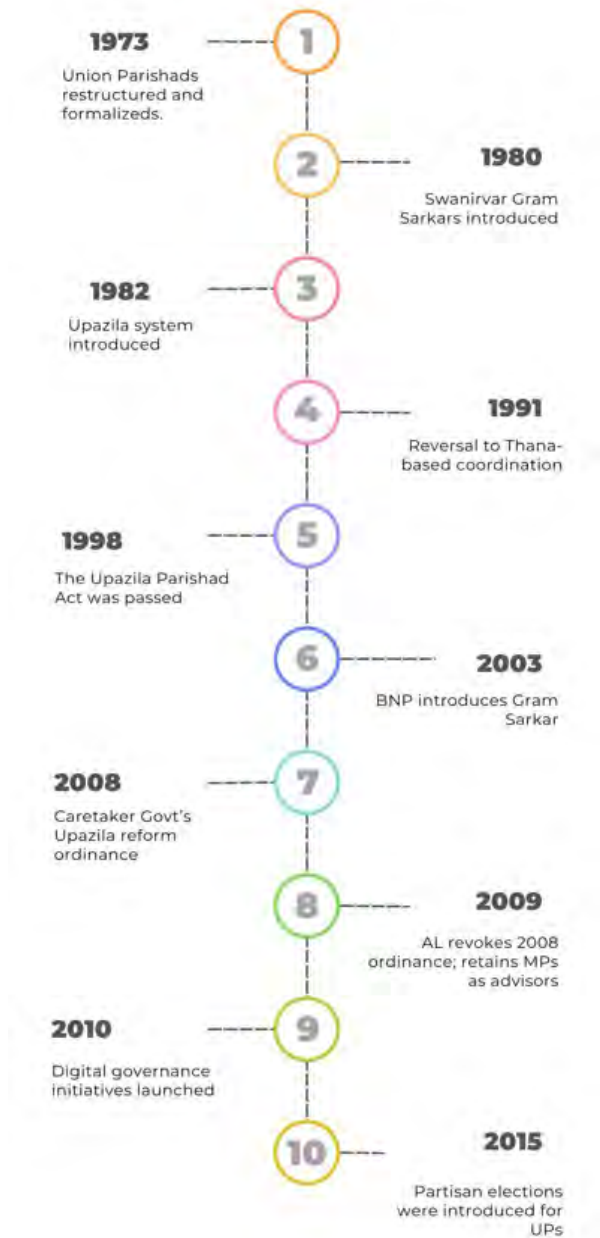


Figure 2.1. Timeline of Key Policy Changes in Local Government

M. Ershad strategically employed local government structures to cultivate support for their emerging political parties. In the post-1991 democratic era, both the Awami League and the BNP have continued to leverage local institutions to maintain party dominance and expand clientele networks. As a result, the design of local governance has functioned more as a mechanism for political entrenchment than for community empowerment.

Second, the structure of local government has undergone repeated alterations with each change in national leadership, reflecting a lack of institutional consistency. Successive regimes have dismantled or reconfigured existing systems (e.g., the abolition of Gram Sarkars and the reversal of upazila reforms) to align with their political priorities. These piecemeal reforms have eroded institutional continuity, undermined institutional memory, and discouraged the development of effective, decentralized governance.

Third, party involvement in local governance has escalated, culminating in the 2015 shift to partisan local elections. The introduction of party symbols in Union, Upazila, and Zila Parishad elections has blurred the boundaries between local representation and national political machinery. This has exacerbated political rivalries in rural areas, reinforced patron-client relationships, and subordinated local governance to party interests, often at the expense of community needs.

Fourth, administrative resistance to decentralization has remained a persistent barrier. Bureaucratic actors—particularly Upazila Nirbahi Officers (UNOs) and central ministries—have routinely undermined the authority of elected local representatives. These actors have resisted the devolution of decision-making powers and resources, thereby weakening coordination, reducing accountability, and limiting the effectiveness of participatory governance mechanisms.

Together, these four enduring features—politicization, institutional inconsistency, party penetration, and administrative resistance—continue to shape the functioning of local government in Bangladesh. They have entrenched elite dominance, deepened political polarization at the village level, and constrained opportunities for inclusive, community-driven development.

Chapter Three

The Nature of Citizen Interfaces/Interactions With Union Parishad Governance

The Union Parishad (UP), Bangladesh's lowest tier of local government, serves as a cornerstone of grassroots governance, offering a vital interface between the state and its citizens. Over the past two decades, this institution has undergone profound transformations in its service delivery mechanisms and political dynamics. This chapter presents empirical findings from field research on the interaction between citizens and the UP, the roles of UP chairs and members in governance, and the complexities of service delivery, law and order, and dispute resolution mechanisms.

During the British and Pakistani periods, interactions between citizens and the UP were limited, largely due to the traditional reliance on informal community leaders for dispute resolution and administrative tasks (Huque & Akhter, 1989). Prior to Bangladesh's independence in 1971, rural governance was informal and centred around traditional community leaders such as village elders and religious figures.

Following independence, the newly formed government emphasized strengthening local governance institutions, including the UP. However, resource constraints and political instability meant that citizen interactions remained limited, with most governance needs fulfilled through informal networks. The UP's focus during this period was primarily on agricultural development and maintaining law and order (Jahan, 2008).

Ziaur Rahman's regime marked a turning point for rural governance, as discussed in the earlier section. Owing to his government's emphasis on rural development programs—such as the Food-for-Work initiative—citizen engagement increased, particularly in infrastructural and agricultural support services (Khan, 1996). However, during Ershad's rule, the role of the UP was again undermined, and no clear evidence of significant citizen engagement with UPs was observed during that period. The democratic transition in 1991

revitalized local governance structures, positioning the UP as a central actor in grassroots development (Hasan, 2000). Throughout the 1990s and 2000s, the UP became the key implementing body for a growing number of social safety net programs. While programs like Vulnerable Group Development (VGD) and Test Relief (TR) were long-standing, the late 1990s also saw the introduction of newer initiatives—such as Old Age Allowance and Widow Allowance—which expanded the scope of welfare provision at the local level (Ahmed et al., 2020). By the early 2000s, the UP was disbursing hundreds of such programs, targeting vulnerable populations with varying objectives, including food security, income support, and emergency relief. However, the proliferation of programs did not necessarily result in greater autonomy or impartiality in delivery. The UP’s capacity to independently administer these services remained limited, and entrenched patron-client relationships frequently shaped distribution processes, leading to politicization and uneven access (Blair, 2005; Rahman & Sarker, 2017).

A transformative shift began in 2009 with the government’s “Digital Bangladesh” agenda, culminating in the establishment of Union Digital Centres (UDCs) in 2010. According to the literature, UDCs were established in every UP to provide citizens with easier access to public services through digital platforms. These centres offered services such as birth and death registration, land records, e-governance applications, and information on social

safety net programs (Ahmed, Rahman, & Sarker, 2020). The core objective was to bridge the digital divide between rural and urban areas and to enhance the accessibility, efficiency, and transparency of local government services. Before digitalization, obtaining birth certificates, land records, and other documentation required in-person visits, lengthy bureaucratic procedures, and often informal payments (Rahman, 2019).

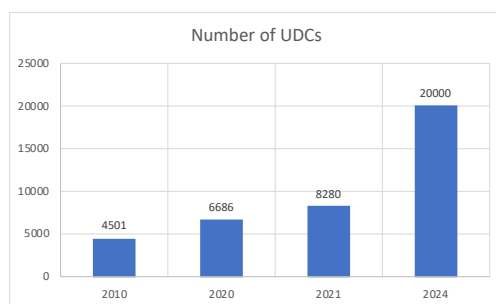


Figure 2.1. Number of UDCs Over the Years (Source: a2i, 2023⁴)

The transition from manual to digital systems brought several key services under the UDC framework. Birth and death registration, tax payments, land mutation records, and pension applications were among the services that shifted from traditional paper-based processes to digital platforms (Ahmed et al., 2020). This change improved the accuracy of official records and facilitated digital applications for government allowances, such as the Old Age Allowance and Widow Allowance. It also streamlined the distribution of social safety nets. Previously, citizens often had to travel to sub-district or district

⁴ <https://a2i.portal.gov.bd/union-digital-centers-digitizing-bangladeshs-grassroots/#:~:text=The%20Honorable%20Prime%20Minister%20officially,the%20UDCs%20increased%20to%20270.>

offices to access these services, incurring significant time and financial costs. With UDCs available at the union level, these services became more accessible. By 2012, over 4,500 UDCs were operational, making services such as birth registration, land records, and e-governance solutions accessible to rural populations (Ahmed et al., 2021).

According to our field study, citizens' interaction with the UDCs reportedly increased substantially due to their function as one-stop service providers. More than 300 public and private services⁵ are available at UDCs. Among the key government services most frequently reported during our field visits were (i) registration services, (ii) social safety net programs, and (iii) arbitration and dispute resolution.

3.1. Registration Services

Our field findings reveal that UPs provide birth and death registration, ID cards, and inheritance certificates. One respondent (43, farmer) from Khulna noted, "Previously, people didn't come to the Union Parishad as they do now. They now come for arbitration, allowances, birth registration, and certificates." Another male respondent (54, businessman) from Shariatpur pointed out that these interactions were much less frequent before.

Additionally, the field data indicate that UP services such as the issuance of trade licences and verification of land documents remain complex and uneven, showing

notable improvements alongside persistent barriers. In Jamalpur, a former UP chairman shared, "You have to approach the member or someone influential for land documents. Without a recommendation, it's hard to get work done." Despite the increased availability of online services, many respondents reported the necessity of relying on intermediaries, particularly for services like birth registration and land documents. A participant from the same village acknowledged, "The system is better now, but it's still harder for the poor and uneducated to access services without help." By contrast, respondents from Shariatpur highlighted a positive shift, especially in terms of increased access for women. One participant observed that women now independently visit the UP for their children's documentation, a significant departure from previous practices.

Field evidence also shows that the importance of UPs has not fundamentally changed with the establishment of UDCs. However, the availability of digital services has increased both the visibility and the perceived efficiency of UPs. Citizens are beginning to recognize the practical benefits of digitalized services, such as faster birth registration and simplified applications for social safety net benefits, which were previously handled manually.

Moreover, the role of UPs in disaster response and infrastructure development remains largely unchanged from earlier decades. Our field observations revealed that during crises such as floods and cyclones, the UP coordinated relief

⁵ <https://a2i.gov.bd/union-digital-centers-digitizing-bangladeshs-grassroots/>

distribution and provided agricultural subsidies to local residents. One member's efforts in organizing food and shelter during a flood exemplify the UP's capacity to address urgent community needs.

Nevertheless, political affiliations were found to influence service delivery. A school headmaster from Cumilla shared, "If you are from their party, your documents will be handled seriously; otherwise, you might face difficulties." Such politicization not only erodes public trust but also undermines the UP's ability to function as a neutral body of local governance.

3.2. Social Safety Nets

Following the restoration of democracy in 1991, successive governments expanded social safety net coverage, introducing programs such as the Old Age Allowance in 1997 and the Widow Allowance in 1998, reflecting a broader commitment to social protection (Rahman & Robson, 2006). Further expansions occurred between 2001 and 2008, including maternal health vouchers and education stipends for primary and secondary students (Khan, 2011).

Field data corroborate these developments. One respondent from Cumilla remarked, "Before 2000, there were no old-age or widow allowances. Now, the Parishad plays a central role in delivering these benefits." These programs have positioned the UP as a vital provider of support services. However, several accounts highlight instances of corruption. A female

respondent from Cox's Bazar stated, "I had to pay 4,000 taka to secure a widow allowance card."

The introduction of UDCs and the use of mobile financial services such as Nagad have enabled the direct transfer of allowances to beneficiaries, thereby reducing the role of intermediaries. A female respondent from Khulna shared, "Now, everything is done through Nagad, and money is sent directly to beneficiaries' accounts." Nevertheless, errors in digital records and limited access remain challenges. A male respondent from Lalmonirhat commented, "Mistakes in online records lead to delays, and rectifying them requires multiple visits to the office." Addressing these governance issues will require stronger accountability mechanisms and improved transparency in the distribution of welfare benefits.

One of the critical issues underscored in the field data is digital divide. Older citizens and those with limited digital literacy struggle with the online system. A male respondent from Jamalpur remarked, "Previously, we could get certificates while sitting in the office. Now, online systems make the process difficult and frustrating, especially for older individuals." Server outages and errors in digital records further compound these difficulties. A fisherman from Sunamganj noted, "Online services are convenient, but the server often crashes, especially during peak periods like school admissions or elections." Additionally, a middle-aged businessman from the same district reported, "Previously, you could

correct a mistake in person. Now, you have to apply online, which takes time and money.”

From manual, paper-based operations to digital platforms, the institution has made significant progress in responding to citizens’ needs. The expansion of social safety net programs and the modernization of administrative services such as birth and death registration reflect this evolution. As the UP continues to confront challenges, including political bias and gaps in digital literacy, its role as the primary interface of rural governance remains more prominent and indispensable than ever.

3.3. Arbitration and Dispute Resolution

Another major function of the UP is arbitration and dispute resolution. In rural Bangladesh, this role is deeply rooted in the traditional practice of shalish—an informal, community-based dispute resolution mechanism. Historically, shalish has played a crucial role in settling conflicts at the village level, often mediated by respected elders or local elites. It primarily addresses family disputes, land conflicts, and minor social offences, operating outside the formal judicial system while maintaining significant influence over rural justice (Jahan, 2008).

Following Bangladesh’s independence in 1971, the role of shalish persisted but became more intertwined with local governance structures as the state sought to strengthen rural justice delivery. The UP became increasingly involved in facilitating

shalish, particularly after the 1993 Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance, which formalized UPs’ engagement in dispute resolution (Blair, 2005).

Between 2001 and 2008, the government, with support from development partners, enacted the Village Courts Act 2006, replacing the Village Courts Ordinance of 1976 to formalize and strengthen local dispute resolution mechanisms. This Act established a statutory framework for village courts, distinct from the traditional shalish system, enabling them to handle minor civil and criminal cases. Subsequent support from development partners, including the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the European Union (EU), facilitated the implementation and activation of these courts across the country (Rahman & Hoque, 2007). This quasi-formal alternative to shalish was designated for cases involving property disputes or civil matters up to a specific monetary threshold. Since the launch of the Village Court Activation Project (VCAP) in 2010 (UNDP, 2015), efforts have been made to institutionalize village courts as accessible, semi-formal legal alternatives to traditional dispute resolution. Backed by donors such as UNDP, the project introduced digital case management and community outreach mechanisms to enhance transparency and legitimacy. These interventions, while noteworthy in scope, remain heavily project-dependent and limited in coverage (UNDP, 2013). Field findings suggest that despite the reported successes in donor evaluations, village courts have not supplanted the shalish system in most unions.

In practice, shalish remains the dominant form of dispute resolution due to its immediacy, low cost, and deep community roots. UP chairmen and members continue to play pivotal roles in organizing these sessions, often initiating mediation through informal channels before escalating to formal village court proceedings. One study participant from Khulna described the process: “If there is a dispute, the chairman sends a chowkidar with a written notice, and neighbours are consulted to find the truth.” The flexibility of shalish allows it to address both familial and property-related conflicts efficiently. However, it is also susceptible to bias, especially when political influence or social hierarchies are at play. In the village of Cumilla, UP representatives, particularly the chairman and ward members, act as chief mediators. They mediate disputes ranging from land ownership conflicts to family matters. One participant from Cumilla noted, “When a dispute arises, the chairman calls both parties to the office and resolves it through shalish.” Members usually attempt to settle issues among themselves before involving the chairman. A female participant from Sunamganj stated, “Shalish is quicker than going to village court, but it depends on who you know. If the chairman or member is biased, the decision might not be fair.” Similarly, a male respondent from Satkhira observed, “In cases where one party has political influence, the decision often favours them, regardless of the merits of the case.”

While some women, particularly in cases of domestic violence or divorce, are increasingly rejecting shalish decisions in

favour of village courts, these instances remain the exception rather than the norm. As one chairman from Jamalpur noted, “Women have become educated and do not want to accept the shalish decisions. They prefer to go to court. ... They do not even listen to the village elders.” This shift signals a changing perception of legitimacy, though access barriers, political interference, and digital illiteracy continue to constrain the usage of village courts.

Overall, while village courts offer a formal channel for legal recourse—particularly where enforceable verdicts are necessary—their reach and reliability remain limited. The contrast between institutional ambitions and ground realities underscores the need for sustained, context-sensitive reform rather than reliance on donor-led, project-based models.

3.4. The Role of Union Parishad Representatives

UP representatives, including the chairman and ward members, play a vital role in local governance, service delivery, and community engagement. As the head of the UP, the chairman has historically played a central role in shaping local governance, ensuring service provision, and acting as a bridge between rural citizens and the administrative system. From the colonial era to the present digital age, the chairman’s role has expanded in scope and complexity, making them a crucial actor in rural governance (Siddiqui, 2005).

The position of UP chairman has been dominated by rural elites, landlords, and

politically affiliated individuals. The Village Chowkidari Act of 1870 introduced the concept of local governance through union-based committees responsible for tax collection to fund village police, known as chowkidars (Ahmed, 2012). During this period, the chairman's role was primarily to maintain law and order, with limited engagement in service delivery. The chairman's position at this stage was largely symbolic, serving as an intermediary between colonial administrators and rural elites. With the formation of Pakistan in 1947, village-based governance positions remained, but local leaders, including union council chairmen, were given more responsibilities related to rural development.

Following Bangladesh's independence in 1971, the Local Government Ordinance (1973) replaced the Union Panchayat of the Pakistani period with UPs, making the chairman an elected representative with increased responsibilities in rural development, infrastructure, and service delivery (Hossain, 2018). This period marked the beginning of a more formalized role for the chairman in local governance. After 1972, the chairman's primary responsibilities included overseeing rural development projects, maintaining law and order, and collecting taxes. However, the centralized governance model meant that UPs had little financial autonomy, limiting the chairman's decision-making power. During Ershad's decentralization reforms (1982–1990), the chairman gained more authority over rural infrastructure, agriculture, and poverty alleviation programs (Zafarullah & Rahman, 2020).

The introduction of Upazila Parishads in 1983 somewhat reduced the power of UP chairmen, as many functions were transferred to the upazila level. With the fall of Ershad's regime, democratic governments from the 1990s onward attempted to strengthen local governance. The chairman's role expanded to include social welfare programs such as food-for-work initiatives, rural health campaigns, and education projects (Ahmed, 2012). The Local Government (Union Parishads) Act, 2009 significantly strengthened the chairman's financial and administrative authority. The Act mandated participatory budgeting, required quarterly open meetings, and ensured greater transparency in local decision-making.

During the British and Pakistani eras, local councils existed, but formal UP members were not a structured component of governance. Instead, informal village committees led by influential figures advised the chairman. Gradually, from the 1970s onwards, UPs began to include elected members, although their role remained limited in comparison to the chairman's authority. These members primarily functioned as advisors or implementers of decisions made by the chairman. However, after the 2009 reforms, reserved seats for women and mandatory ward-level representation enhanced the legislative and financial oversight roles of UP members (Ahmed, 2012). This reform shifted the power dynamic, making the chairman more accountable to elected members. However, our field findings indicate that the chairman continues to occupy a central and highly visible position in local governance, overseeing service delivery, resource

allocation, and community arbitration (Chowdhury, 2009). The chairman frequently acts as the chief arbitrator in shalish proceedings. Their involvement extends beyond administrative functions to active community engagement. A respondent from Shariatpur noted, “The chairman oversees marriages to ensure the legal age is followed. Previously, underage marriages were common, but now birth registration is mandatory, and the chairman plays a critical role in enforcing this.” At the same time, the chairman’s authority is complemented by ward members, who serve as the first point of contact for citizens navigating bureaucratic processes such as ID card verification, arbitration, and application processing. One ward member from Cumilla stated, “Without my signature, nothing can be done,” underscoring the centrality of their role in local governance.

Field findings suggest that members often mediate disputes in their early stages before escalating matters to the chairman. Their responsibilities go beyond dispute resolution, encompassing active participation in social functions such as weddings and funerals, where they provide both logistical and administrative support. However, the extent of their influence

varies across wards. While some members are proactive and diligent, others face accusations of corruption. For instance, a male respondent from Shatkhira observed, “Some members demand money for even the smallest tasks, like issuing a certificate.” Respondents further noted that the requirement for digital seals and signatures has increased citizens’ dependence on ward members.

Moreover, field findings highlight a significant transformation in the dynamics of local governance due to the growing influence of national politics. In earlier decades, chairmen held substantial authority over local law enforcement, but police and bureaucratic officials now operate under the directives of MPs and higher authorities, often bypassing local elected representatives.

Table 3.1. Major Interventions and Implications of Policy Changes by Decade

Period	Key changes in UP functions, roles, and services	Reasons for change	Key policies/interventions	Context-change interaction
1972–1990	- UP primarily served as a limited administrative body focused on tax collection and basic dispute resolution - Services were largely inaccessible to marginalized groups - Local elites/zamindars dominated UP leadership	- Post-independence administrative continuity from the colonial period - Weak institutional framework - Lack of political will for inclusive local governance	- Basic UP structure under the 1976 Village Court Ordinance - No major decentralization reforms	- The sociopolitical environment was highly centralized and informal - Power mediated by local elites limited citizen participation
1990–2001	- Democratization revitalized UP - Broader citizen participation began - UPs started implementing a wider set of social safety net programs - Competitive local elections increased	- Transition to democratic rule post-1990 movement - Rising demand for local accountability - Growing donor emphasis on decentralization	- Local Government Ordinance (1993) - Expansion of old-age and widow allowances - Emphasis on grassroots development	- Political opening encouraged more engagement with UPs - Patron-client dynamics persisted, but participation widened. - Change driven by new democratic norms and donor pressure
2001–2007	- Introduction of targeted pro-poor programs (VGD, TR) - UPs implemented many safety net schemes, but access remained unequal - Political favouritism and elite capture continued - New actors (businesspersons, party-backed candidates) entered UP elections	- Push for poverty reduction via local governance - Shift toward performance-based aid and decentralization - Weak enforcement of anti-corruption norms	- Expansion of safety net programming - Various donor-supported local governance projects (e.g., LGSP pilots)	- Despite policy growth, entrenched patronage diluted the impact - UPs had service delivery roles but limited autonomy - National political influence increased

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Period	Key changes in UP functions, roles, and services	Reasons for change	Key policies/ interventions	Context–change interaction
2008–2015	- Digital Bangladesh agenda introduced Union Digital Centres (UDCs) - Online services (birth registration, land records) expanded - UP chairman's role shifted toward e-service oversight - Women's reserved seats and participatory provisions formalized	- National push for ICT integration - Increased donor support for service digitalization - Legal and institutional reforms post-2008 elections	- Local Government (Union Parishads) Act, 2009 - Introduction of UDCs (2010) - Digital Bangladesh Vision 2021	- Digital tools expanded service access, but unevenly - Socioeconomic divides (digital literacy, gender) persisted - Centralization of party control limited local decision-making
2015–present	- Politicization deepened: party-backed candidates dominated - Chairman's autonomy declined; dependence on MPs and bureaucrats grew - Citizens' access is influenced by political loyalty - Increased female participation, but structural inequalities persist	- Rise of centralized political control - Erosion of local government autonomy - Decline of competitive local elections - Digital divide and elite capture	- Continued rollout of e-services - National political practices override local governance norms - Gender inclusion initiatives	- Technological progress improved efficiency but did not fully democratize access - Political interference redefined local governance as partisan - Traditional community-focused UP has become a politicized institution

Chapter Four

Evolving Village Politics in Bangladesh

Since independence, the village has remained a critical site of political negotiation, elite contestation, and state-building in Bangladesh. This chapter traces the major shifts in rural political dynamics from 1971 to 2024, showing how national-level changes like regime transitions, party competition, and institutional reforms have occurred. Drawing on existing literature and field-level observations, the chapter explores four key phases in rural politics, highlighting how local government structures, party networks, and patronage systems have interacted to reconfigure power relations at the village level over time. Together, these sections offer a historical lens to understand contemporary developments in village governance and rural political participation.

4.1. Rural Politics in Bangladesh: 1971–1975

Immediately after independence, Bangladesh experienced transformative changes in rural politics within a short period. The previously influential political party, the Muslim League, was banned. Many of its members outwardly changed their allegiance to the Awami League, although there were indications that they had not fully abandoned their commitment to the Muslim League (BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, 1980). The Union Council under the Basic Democracy system⁶ was replaced by Relief Committees, which were essentially run by Awami Leaguers, to oversee the distribution of government aid, including support to the agricultural sector in the form of credit, pesticides, fertilizers, and other inputs (Blair, 1978). The lowest tier of rural administration was renamed the Union Parishad (UP), which soon replaced the Relief Committees. The UP comprised three wards, with a chairman, a vice-

⁶ Basic Democracies, a local government system introduced in the early 1960s by General Ayub Khan, made an attempt to initiate a grassroots-level democratic system.

chairman, and three members. Its first election, held in 1973, interestingly revealed a decline in the Awami League's popularity at the local level. A striking manifestation of this decline was that even a few former Muslim League politicians managed to win as chairmen in this election (BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, 1980; Westergaard, 1985).

The relative vibrancy of underground left-wing politics, which began in 1972, was a unique feature of the rural political landscape but was largely confined to the 1970s (Maniruzzaman, 1975). Arens and van Beurden (1977), in their ethnographic research on a single village in the mid-1970s, described how the Rat Bahini (forces of the night—an expression used by villagers to denote underground leftist groups) attempted to gain a foothold in rural politics by mobilizing the poor against wealthy landowners. The state's counter-insurgency strategies to suppress such anti-systemic left politics included the deployment of a specially trained militia force—the Rakkhi Bahini—which soon gained notoriety as a ruthless instrument of state terror, with deep penetration into rural society. Elected members of UPs were politically mobilized to assist in suppressing the leftist militants. Inspired by the Naxalite ideology emanating from West Bengal, these underground groups tried to garner support from the rural poor by engaging in armed conflict with Awami League politicians and law enforcement agencies. Although they largely failed to generate widespread support, they were generally admired by villagers for their pro-poor stance (Hartmann & Boyce, 1983).

4.2. Politics in Villages During 1975–1981

Following the assassination of Sheikh Mujibur Rahman in 1975, the country plunged into serious turmoil, and General Ziaur Rahman assumed power. The Zia regime soon organized UP elections in 1977 (Westergaard, 1999). A significant number of political leaders associated with anti-liberation forces resurfaced and contested the elections, hoping to shed their pariah status. A survey conducted in 1977 (Rashiduzzaman, 1978) indicated that approximately 23% of the elected representatives were affiliated with the Muslim League and other right-wing parties. Candidates who had been associated with the Awami League in preceding years also performed well, accounting for 47% of the winners. With moderately left and radical candidates making up 21% and 1% of the winners, respectively, it became clear that leftist forces had largely failed to establish themselves as major political actors in rural society during the 1970s. The defeat of the left, whose leaders were mostly outsiders, also reflected the rural electorate's preference for proven local leaders who could “deliver the goods”—that is, providing material benefits and patronage (Rashiduzzaman, 1978; Westergaard, 1985).

Through the mobilization of newly elected village representatives, General Zia promoted his “19-point programme,” which also laid the groundwork for the political infrastructure needed to establish his own political party. His leadership charisma and

intense political mobilization in rural areas led to the formation of the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), which sought to rapidly build a strong rural political base (Huque, 1985). Village leaders previously associated with the former President Ayub Khan, the Muslim League, and even the Awami League joined the BNP in large numbers (Arn & Mannan, 1980; BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, 1980; Westergaard, 1995). Zia also introduced the Gram Sarkar—a village-based body comprising 11 members, led by a Gram Pradhan (village head). These members were selected on the basis of consensus and negotiation in a Gram Shava (village meeting) in which all adult villagers could participate.

4.3. Politics in Rural Bangladesh: 1991–2006

Bangladesh initiated a democratic transition following the removal of General Ershad (1982–1990) from power through a democratic movement led by the Awami League and BNP. This transition period witnessed several legal and institutional changes that introduced new dynamics into rural politics. The Local Government Act was amended twice—first in 1993, which divided the UP into nine wards, each represented by an elected member (Local Government (Pourashava) Act, 1993). The second amendment in 1997 introduced three reserved, elected seats for women from three zones, each comprising three wards (Panday, 2008). Although women had previously held reserved seats, these were filled through nomination by those

elected to “general” seats, not through direct election (Shehabuddin, 1999). The new provision paved the way for increased involvement of women in rural local government and, by extension, in rural politics.

During the 1990s, both the BNP and Awami League held national power—BNP in 1991 and Awami League in 1996—with significant political repercussions at the village level. Both parties prioritized strengthening their grassroots support and securing UP positions, especially the chairpersonships. In a revisit to south-western villages in 1997, Siddiqui (2000) observed that political parties had increasingly established union-level party organizations and infiltrated local institutions such as school and college committees, as well as haat and bazaar management bodies—a trend absent in his fieldwork during the 1970s. During the 90s, local Jatiya Party leaders joined both BNP and Awami League in droves. There were, perhaps, some new and younger entrants of elites in politics at the rural level due to the consolidation of the BNP and Awami League as new dominant powers. However, these new elites essentially consisted of the old political actors, who entered the fray in the decade of the 80s.

The penetration of party politics into local institutions intensified further in the early 2000s. Lewis and Hossain (2008),⁷ in their analysis of three villages, found that a significant number of villagers were directly involved in party politics, and village-level political dynamics were

⁷ Based on 2024 fieldwork.

becoming increasingly entangled with national politics. In a south-central village, for example, a BNP-affiliated female UP member leveraged her relationship with the local MP, who persuaded the UP chairman to approve a road repair project in her constituency (Chowdhury & Sarker, 2016). MPs were found to play critical informal roles in managing local “vote banks” by establishing patronage networks through control over resource allocation. A former BNP-affiliated UP chairman from a village in Jamalpur described how MPs, regardless of their party affiliations, interfered in local politics to entrench patronage networks:

“BNP itself messed up everything here. The MP had connections with the higher-level people. He drove away all the good political workers and enrolled his own family members. He was a butcher. It is the same with the Awami League. ... It is like this from the 90s.

—Former BNP affiliated UP Chairman, Jamalpur

However, our fieldwork in both Cumilla and Jamalpur suggests that becoming a UP chairman without party affiliation was still possible during this period, indicating that individual leadership traits continued to matter.⁸ Lewis and Hossain (2008) also documented instances where UP chairmen maintained power through a strategy the authors termed the “politics of reputation”—balancing relationships with diverse opposition leaders, businesspersons, local elites, and the poor.

This strategic alliance-building was central to being a successful UP chairman. As one respondent noted:

“Before 2000, when the chairmen and members could treat the villagers fairly by going beyond their party symbols or political identities, they were considered a part of the community. They were political figures, but they did not show that off in front of people. Their political identities were not known to the community.

—Respondent, Jamalpur

This period also witnessed the growing importance of money in rural politics. An assistant headmaster in Cumilla reported that the influence of money began in the 1980s and intensified over time. Siddiqui (2000) and Westergaard and Hossain (2005) similarly observed this trend, identifying forms of financial transaction such as donations to village mosques and madrasas, funding road repairs, and direct monetary exchanges during door-to-door campaigning. Our fieldwork in Cumilla and Jamalpur revealed comparable patterns, where both international and domestic migrants provided financial support to candidates in UP elections.

4.4. Politics in Rural Bangladesh During 2009–2024

The Awami League came to power in 2008 with a landslide victory. As discussed in

⁸ See also Siddiqui (2000) for similar observations.

the earlier section, both the Awami League and BNP exerted their national positions of power at the rural level through resource mobilization, formation of political alliances, and the building of patronage networks in the 1990s. A key actor in this process was the MPs, whose role was significantly expanded to widen these networks. The Upazila Parishad Act of 2009 formally assigned MPs the role of “adviser,” granting them the authority to oversee development initiatives in their constituencies. Over time, the amount of discretionary funds MPs could allocate increased substantially. These enhanced powers enabled MPs to control the distribution of a significant share of social safety net resources, direct funding flows for local development, and assist party leaders in accessing government resources. The revisit of three villages by Lewis and Hossain (2019) in 2016, initially studied in 2004, showed that the Awami League had consolidated its control over the local power structure by marginalizing the opposition, capturing local institutions, and mobilizing party-affiliated brokers. In each of these endeavours, MPs played a central role.

Another major policy development that strengthened the Awami League’s political monopoly was the introduction of party symbols in UP elections in 2016—the first time such a system was introduced in Bangladesh (Ahmed, 2016). The Awami League’s symbol, the boat—which is synonymous with the party—undermined the neutrality of local bureaucracies and law enforcement agencies, which often aligned with ruling party-backed candidates (Rahman & Nasrin, 2017). The previous

idea of an “individual candidate” in UP chairman elections was effectively replaced by that of a “party candidate,” creating space for intra-party conflicts, the buying of party nominations, and the intimidation of opposing candidates (Majumdar, 2016). The UP election in 2016 was marked by unprecedented violence and widespread electoral manipulation in favour of the Awami League. Most violent incidents stemmed from infighting among different local factions of the Awami League rather than conflicts with opposition parties. Ruling party operatives used intimidation and force to deter opposition and intra-party rivals from submitting or maintaining nominations. Evidence suggests that local administrations assisted in polling station capture, ballot stuffing, and vote rigging. Aspiring Awami League chairman candidates reportedly spent large sums of money to secure party nominations (Majumdar, 2016). As a result, very few BNP chairman candidates won, and over 200 Awami League candidates were elected unopposed—outcomes widely considered non-credible (Majumdar, 2016; Prothom Alo, 2016).

“ The boat, sheaf of paddy, plough—these are all national [election] symbols. After the introduction of the symbols, you cannot expect neutrality [of the election administration] in the election.

—Former BNP-affiliated UP chairman, Cumilla.

In earlier decades, constituents voted for individual candidates and could hold

them accountable (Nazneen & Hassan, 2017). However, with the introduction of party-affiliated UP elections, electoral accountability shifted from individuals to political parties, compelling party supporters to vote based on nominations rather than personal reputations. A BNP-affiliated political leader in Cumilla recalled how candidates once campaigned door-to-door to persuade voters—an approach now largely absent. Even an Awami League-affiliated UP member in Jamalpur criticized elections with party symbols, arguing they had weakened “party accountability.” Respondents across all of our studied villages observed that elected representatives had grown increasingly disconnected from the public, aligning themselves more closely with party leaders and activists instrumental in election victories.

“ It is the MP who decides who is going to be the chairman. The chairman, again, decides who is going to be the member. Since they are running for the election with party symbols, village politics is dictated by national politics.

—Respondent, Shariatpur

The Awami League’s firm grip on power also contributed to the erosion of BNP’s influence at the village level. With assistance from state administration and village-based party wings, local Awami League leaders were able to largely eliminate BNP leadership from the village political arena (Hassan, 2018).

Chapter Five

Dynamics of Community Governance and Power Structure in Villages

Westergaard (1985) wrote that the samaj was the key social organization in the 1970s, serving both a “symbolic and organizational” role for the political and religious community. A samaj may be coterminous with the village or extend beyond it, and it is typically led by a council of elders who act as moral arbiters of community life and play an important role in dispute settlement. In addition to resolving disputes, maintaining social control and managing conflicts among the leaders of the samaj and their respective kinship groups were also essential functions of the samaj (Bertocci, 1970). Arens and Beurden (1977) specified that the samaj functions as both a court and an assembly, possessing legislative and executive powers within the village.

The 1970s literature highlights ownership of land as the primary determinant in the power structure. For instance, in Tinpara and Hajipur villages, where Bertocci (1970) conducted his study, the homestead groups were referred to as reyais. Several of these reyais, which

surpassed others in terms of landownership and family status, were influential enough to constitute the samaj. Each sardar represented their respective reyais in the samaj. At Jhagrapur, the samaj heads were called Mandals, who, in addition to their landownership, represented the “strongest bangshas (family status)” (Arens & Beurden, 1977). The samaj was never recognized as a legal entity, but during the 1970s, appointed government officials or councils occasionally sought its advice or cooperation when necessary.

The social elites entered into patron-client relationships with small farmers, most of whom were part of their kinship networks or, to some extent, their neighbours. Through the land-based elites, small farmers could access employment, seasonal credit, and other benefits in exchange for their support during disputes involving the landowners (Arthur & McNicoll, 1978).

During the mid to late 1970s, the samaj was still a highly functional entity. However,

studies conducted during that period noted signs of weakening when compared to earlier decades. The emergence of factions replacing unified leadership was evident in villages such as Boringram and Jagatpur during this time (Siddiqui, 2000; Westergaard & Hossain, 2005)⁹.

The early 1980s saw the nationwide introduction and subsequent withdrawal of Ziaur Rahman's Swanirvar Gram Sarkar initiative¹⁰. Barman's (1988) study, conducted in 1980–1981, highlights the continuing importance of land and wealth, bangsha (family status/ancestry), and goshthi (size of kinship networks). However, other contributory factors also emerged in the discussion, including education, physical and intellectual fitness, and contact with higher-level government officials and public representatives.

Barman (1988) also noted that, owing to the Gram Sarkar, leadership in villages during this period tended to adopt a more collective approach rather than remaining individual-centric—a point also highlighted by Westergaard (1999). During the election of 1981, villagers elected members from all factions. Following this, the village samaj unified, although it was not discussed whether this unification was sustained in the following years.

Notably, during the mid-1980s, due to various development programs and the expansion of NGO activities, new leadership demands emerged in villages,

primarily driven by the NGOs. Leaders in the villages were required to undertake development activities (Barman, 1988). These newly created roles offered opportunities for educated and relatively younger villagers to assume leadership positions, primarily due to their skills “in making contacts with different officials connected with development activities and also with the intermediate level political elites” (Rahman, 1986, as cited in Momtaz, 1990, p. 293). These individuals mostly came from large and middle-class peasant backgrounds (Momtaz, 1990). The traditional elites retained control over conventional roles. However, with this “dispersion of power,” the influence of traditional samaj leaders over village society declined. Karim (1990) also noted that matrimonial alliances between old and new elites facilitated acceptance of the new leaders within the samaj. The early 1980s were also marked by the inclusion of women in local government through reserved seats, as well as in various institutions, mostly created by NGOs for economic purposes.

However, studies have shown that during the 1980s, despite the introduction of development projects in rural areas targeting the poor, land-based patron-client relationships persisted (BRAC Research and Evaluation Division, 1980; Momtaz, 1990). Local elites continued to exercise control over the allocation of development resources. A comparative assessment conducted by Momtaz in 1987, based on

⁹ Both the studies had their first round of fieldwork conducted in early 1970s, and the studies were repeated again in 1990s.

¹⁰ Gram Sarkar was introduced on 21 June 1980 and was abolished in July 1982.

government-led large-scale development projects,¹¹ showed that despite the development interventions, access to land remained concentrated among powerful people (Momtaz, 1990). Landowners also dominated development institutions and controlled resource distribution, which helped reinforce existing clientelist ties. At the same time, however, the 1980s also witnessed signs of socioeconomic transformation, including increased labour mobility, the commercialization of agriculture, and the expansion of non-farm sectors (Scott & UNU-WIDER, 2014). These developments indicated a potential future weakening of traditional land-based patron-client systems.

During the 1990s, there is evidence of the samaj further breaking down, accompanied by a rise in factional leadership (Arens, 2011; Siddiqui, 2000; Westergaard & Hossain, 2005). In Boringram, for instance, the main samaj fragmented into 10 different factions, which significantly affected the informal governance process of the village. The influence of samaj leaders in enforcing social regulations declined, although faction leaders retained some influence (Siddique, 2000). Similarly, traditional leaders began losing the trust of villagers (Arens, 2011; Westergaard & Hossain, 2005). This erosion of power and status can largely be attributed to visible economic development within the village. As villagers became less economically dependent on traditional patrons—due to emerging economic opportunities—they increasingly

disregarded these leaders' authority, albeit passively (Siddiqui, 2000; Westergaard & Hossain, 2005). This reduced dependency stemmed from a rise in employment across various sectors, in addition to agriculture. Simultaneously, the expansion of microfinance institutions providing loans diminished villagers' financial reliance on elites. For instance, Arens (2011) noted that by 1998, one of the most influential families in Jhagrapur was a "capitalist entrepreneur" household. Their activities had diversified to include land-based commercial enterprises, service provision, and active engagement with local government power structures. By the end of the 1990s, the village shalish system had also evolved. For instance, in Jagatpur, traditional forms of shalish became dysfunctional, prompting a shift towards shalish processes mediated by UP officials. A similar trend occurred in Boringram. While villagers generally remained reluctant to involve formal institutions in local disputes, faction leaders increasingly recognized the need to conduct shalish more transparently to avoid future disputes. As a result, different factions agreed to hold shalish sessions openly before the entire village.

In the post-2000 period, the traditional samaj appears to have weakened further, due to three main factors: increasing intergenerational tensions, the post-1991 growth of party politics, and village households' increased external linkages (Lewis & Hossain, 2008).¹² Lewis and Hossain (2008) also observed decline in

¹¹ The study included two villages—one of which was included under the Integrated Rural Development Programme (IRDP), a major rural development program instituted by the Bangladesh Government while the other was not.

¹² These observations were based on fieldworks in 2004.

land-based patron-client relationships, as the bases for power and status became more diverse and competitive. According to Qayum (2021, p. 63), this transformation is driven not only by NGO interventions but also by “broader transformations in livelihood mechanisms; increased migration, access to education, shifting landholding patterns, and the capital and skills that NGOs inject into rural society.” This is also reflected in a 2006 survey conducted by Qayum, which demonstrated that traditional clientelist ties—such as those based on land-labour and kinship—were increasingly being replaced by more electoral forms of exchange.

Although traditional shalish remains operational as an institution, it has arguably lost its previous authority and status. The composition of shalish members has also changed substantially. Traditional land-based local elites are gradually being replaced by business and political elites, who now wield greater influence over shalish decisions. With trust in the traditional shalish further eroded, villagers have become more inclined to seek dispute resolution through informal shalish mechanisms led by UP members. According to Lewis and Hossain (2008), politically active youth are increasingly mediating minor land and neighbourly disputes, while mosque leaders have assumed a more prominent role in resolving intra-household conflicts. However, women’s participation in shalish and the prioritization of their concerns continue to be largely neglected.

5.1. Village Social Order in 2024

Our fieldwork in 2024 asked the respondents to reflect on samaj’s role in the past. Their reflections align with the discussion presented in the earlier section. In their respective villages, samaj used to play a strong and significant role, primarily in dispute resolution, especially in family, land, and property matters. Samaj also helped villagers in organizing marriages and other important social events and, most importantly, in maintaining order in rural society. In their opinion, the commoners in the village used to have trust in and respect for the samaj leaders. Across villages, respondents believe there is a general decline in the role and influence of the samaj in rural society. For instance, the respondents in Khulna stated, “The matbors could punish any family by ostracising them, in case they violated the rules set by the village community with regard to both private and public lives. In recent years, however, the samaj has not been unified enough to enforce that kind of decision on someone.” In Lalmonirhat, in response to the question of what has changed in the last two decades, the respondents said, “Twenty-five years ago, people used to listen to the opinions of the village elders, ... the elites in the rural society used to conduct the shalish. People would happily accept the decisions made by the Dewani Matbors.” Similarly, in Cox’s Bazar, sardars would intervene in managing and solving conflicts, a practice that prevailed until late 2007. After 2010, they believe that the local government

representatives became more important in the social sphere.

We have identified several factors responsible for the gradual weakening of the traditional samaj's role over the years. The first factor, as observed earlier, is the decline in social and economic dependence on power elites, particularly with the expansion of economic opportunities. Improved connectivity with cities and greater access to alternative economic opportunities beyond land-based traditional occupations have contributed to reduced dependency on land-owning elites. This declining dependency enabled the common people to challenge the traditional justice system, which was dominated by the traditional power elites, and encouraged them to seek alternative mechanisms for resolving disputes.

In our study villages, respondents also highlighted the role of education as a driver of this change. Educated youth are increasingly challenging the decisions made by the samaj and matbors. As one respondent said, "When literacy rates were low, people remained silent out of fear, thinking they knew less and accepted whatever judgment was given."

While economic and social empowerment played a key role in the change, people also believe that the increasingly biased and unethical practices of the community leaders in the dispute-resolution process have contributed to the decline in people's trust in the samaj. In Jamalpur, for instance, one household member said, "Nowadays, some judgments are proper, and some are

not, whereas previously, all judgments were proper. Now, judgments are influenced by money. Whether you are right or wrong doesn't matter; judgments favour those who have money and can pay." Similar views were expressed in Lalmonirhat and Cumilla. Surveys also show that, in general, and particularly among women, shalish is reported to deliver biased results (BLAST, 2013; UNDP, 2016).

Villagers also believed that with greater economic freedom, increased education, and awareness, demands for a more formalized system of justice have increased in recent decades. For instance, in Shairatpur, in a village where the majority are migrants, people tend to rely more on the formal justice system as they can afford to do so.

However, surveys show that alternative dispute resolution mechanisms are still very popular in Bangladesh compared to formal systems (HiiL, 2018; UNDP, 2016). During our field visits, we also observed that a key role of local government representatives is to participate in local dispute resolutions. This feature was also noted by Lewis and Hossain in 2004 (Lewis & Hossain, 2008). In our 2024 exploration, we also found evidence suggesting that local government leaders are increasingly conducting shalish. In our key informant interviews (KIIs) in Cox's Bazar, it was said that in recent decades, people prefer the local government to be involved in dispute resolution, while the participation of social elites has become more optional. "When resolved by sardars, neighbours, or relatives, there is a possibility or likelihood

of the issue arising again later. However, when resolved by members or chairmen, they provide a written document of their judgment, which can be useful in the future. As a result, the likelihood of the same issue causing trouble a second time is significantly reduced.”

5.2. Elites in Rural Society

In contemporary rural society, “elites” refer to individuals and families who wield power and influence. For instance, in a recent interview, one of the social elites from Cumilla stated, “The villagers still respect and obey our words, and we have control in the village.” His words underscore the authoritative role of elites in rural settings.

The composition of elites varies significantly between villages. Closer inspection suggests that these differences are largely superficial, while the underlying factors defining elites are often common across locations—wealth, political connections, and family lineage. When asked to identify the current elites in their village, respondents in Cumilla mentioned family names such as “Syed” and “Khandoker,” some of the traditionally elite titleholders. In explaining why these families are considered elites, respondents referred to their high levels of education, the presence of family members employed in the service sector, and members who send remittances (KII, member, Cumilla). Thus, elites are typically individuals who are educated, wealthy, and enjoy a certain social standing in society. During our fieldwork in Cumilla, however, we also observed that politics plays a significant role

in determining elite status. Often, political and social factors behind elite status coincide. For example, the most influential elite in one of the villages visited is a former local government chairperson who held this position for 24 years. Being a “Syed” himself, he benefitted from the support of an educated and large kinship network, along with remittance-earning family members. However, his elite status appears to have been enhanced and sustained by his long career in politics.

The village we studied in Shariatpur has a large number of overseas migrants, contributing to a slightly different dynamic in elite formation. Village elites here can be categorized into three groups. The first group comprises old elites, who have long held elite status based on traditional family prestige, wealth, and education.

The second group includes migrants who went abroad during the late 1980s and accumulated significant wealth through remittances. These individuals have also assisted others in migrating. Upon their return, many settled in Dhaka but continue to maintain close ties with their village by donating money on various occasions, especially for religious reasons. This group lacks traditional family status or formal education but is well-respected due to its wealth.

The third group differs from the first two in that its members are actively involved in politics. These elites are relatively young and have roots in the student political wing of the ruling party. According to villagers, “Since everyone in the village is more or

less wealthy, it's their family lineage, political connection, and education that make them elites in this village.”

Our fieldwork in the Jamalpur village shows that social elites there can also be divided into two broad groups. The first group comprises old elites—families that have historically owned substantial land in the locality. For instance, one family has been handling the “dewanis”¹³ for three generations and continues to possess abundant land, which has supported their elite status. Additionally, the present local government member belongs to this family, further reinforcing their position in the village. In contrast, the second group of elites lacks high family status or significant landholdings but has achieved influence through long-standing involvement in politics, particularly via affiliations with the ruling party. For example, a former local government chairperson from this village belongs to this category.

During our fieldwork, we also observed that not all elites remain equally active in village society. Some traditional wealthy elites have loosened their ties to the village, selling off land and relocating to towns or cities. Although they maintain occasional presence and retain social acceptance in the community, they seldom participate in village affairs. Another group of traditional elites still reside in the village but have gradually withdrawn themselves from active social engagement. When asked about this withdrawal, many cited the growing economic independence of villagers, who now often challenge or disregard their

authority. These elites tend to participate in events such as shalish only if invited and express concern over whether they still receive the respect they believe they deserve. Politics is the primary determinant of continued engagement among traditional elites. Among the older elites, those who remain socially active are often individuals who are currently or formerly involved in politics. Our respondents such as the ex-chairperson from Cumilla and the current members in Jamalpur are examples of this group.

Among those who actively engage in village matters are the competing new elites—wealthy individuals such as returnee migrants in Cumilla or Shariatpur, businessmen in Khulna or Satkhira, or the aaradars (wholesale fish traders) in the village of Sunamganj. In Cox's Bazar, while identifying the role of wealthy new elites, respondents noted that elites are those who provide financial assistance during times of need. In other villages—such as those in Satkhira, Cumilla, Jamalpur, and Lalmonirhat—we observed that wealthy individuals who also contribute to social and religious events, as well as to building infrastructure, are considered elite. Establishing mosques and madrasas in villages is the most common route to gaining social prominence. Consequently, the number of mosques has increased considerably in these villages—a pattern also noted in the other study sites. Qurbani (sacrifice of animals during Eid-ul-Adha) is another means through which wealthy individuals gain visibility and recognition. As one member of the Khandaker family in

¹³ Village selected position for similar positions, similar as matbors, sardars, etc.

Cumilla stated in a KII, “It is the Khandakers who dominate the Qurbani. We distribute huge amounts of meat. In our sacrifice, the share that is supposed to be distributed is always the highest.” Many of these new elites also participate in politics or aspire to do so, though many do not. Since 2016, when UP elections were allowed to use party identities, the dominant party has created greater opportunities for wealthy individuals to enter politics. Local-level party positions are now increasingly being sold to the highest bidders.

The most active group of elites in the villages, as our fieldwork of 2024 reveals, are the new elites directly involved in politics. These individuals are relatively young, often having been active in student and youth wings of the ruling party, and have gained increasing prominence over the past decade. With the rise of a dominant-party state since 2009—particularly after the second term (2009–2014) of the Awami League—the party’s political penetration has expanded significantly at the rural level (Chowdhury & Sarker, 2016). As a respondent in Cox’s Bazar explained, “The political leaders were not so powerful even before 2012, but recently, their power and influence are on the rise.” This politically active group plays a central role in village affairs, especially in dispute resolution and maintaining social order. A respondent in Satkhira observed, “In the last 10 years, many joined party politics in this village, and they hold positions in the party. For this reason, politics entered every sphere in this village. Whenever we have any events in the village, they deal with the logistics

and administrative procedures. It is a good thing that we don’t have to deal with these anymore, but at the same time, many unfair activities and injustices are happening in society with their support.” In Cox’s Bazar, respondents reported that political elites increasingly play an active role in dispute resolution and the distribution of safety nets and other government assistance. Our respondents—including present and former chairpersons in Jamalpur and two groups of competing political leaders in Shariatpur—belong to this category.

Among villagers, traditional elites still enjoy widespread acceptance stemming from their past contributions and family status. However, their significance in other spheres—especially economic and social—has been declining. Comparatively, across the villages studied, the rise of new or competing elites is evident. While villagers have not fully embraced these individuals in their evolving roles as social elites, the roles played by new elites are unavoidable in daily village life.

The field studies conducted in 2024 also reveal that the land-based patron-client relationship has evolved significantly over the last four decades. The transformation that began in the 1980s—driven by expanding economic opportunities and development initiatives—created avenues for new elites to enter village society. This shift ultimately altered the dynamics of patron-client relationships during the 1990s and 2000s. In more recent decades, especially post-2009, the consolidation of national political control by a single dominant party has profoundly affected

local governance and politics. The influence of this dominant party has substantially changed both the nature and composition

of local elites, with patronage networks becoming increasingly centred around partisan politics.

Table 5.1. Changing Nature of Elites

Factors	Traditional elites		Competing elites	
	Active	Not Active	Wealthy elites	Politically active elites
Normative acceptance ¹⁴	High	High	Low	Low
Economic importance	High	Low	High	Moderate
Social importance	High	Low	Moderate	High
Political importance	High	Low	Moderate	High

¹⁴ If villagers are ready to accept them as “elites” in the place of the old elites they have known and respected for years.

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Chapter Six

Conclusion

In the context of Bangladesh, several studies emerged in the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s that explained how the villages of Bangladesh were undergoing changes as the national political landscape, economic conditions, and technological transformations evolved. These studies show that, over the years, the role, influence, and impact of the traditional samaj have gradually declined, as the land-based elites—who previously enjoyed distinctive social esteem due to their resources and family status—were being replaced by a new type of elite. These new elites were relatively more educated, participated in diverse economic activities, and succeeded in building new patron-client relationships. Although the traditional elites continued to be respected and to participate in shalish and in maintaining the social order of village life, the emerging political elites were more politically connected, more resourceful, and were increasingly interested in investing in village-based businesses. At the same time, it is important to note that, over the first three and a half decades—from the 1970s to the early 2000s—successive regimes

attempted to design and redesign local government structures, and the effects of this restructuring gradually trickled down to the village level. For instance, Zia’s Gram Sarkar initiative empowered rural elites irrespective of their political identity, while Ershad’s effort to introduce Upazila Parishad had very limited impact at the village level. In contrast, studies show that the regular elections at the UP level since the 1990s and the increasing significance of this local-level institution created opportunities for party politics to penetrate the village level, which eventually transformed the nature, role, and influence of elites.

However, over the last two decades, very few studies have emerged to explain or explore the changing dynamics of villages. The studies that do exist, in most cases, merely revisit earlier findings, and none of them cover the post-2015 period. This raises important questions: How have the villages of Bangladesh evolved since 2000? What can we say about the existing sociopolitical and economic dynamics unravelling within the villages? What are

the factors influencing this evolution? What can we say about the current elites who are affecting the lives and livelihoods of villagers? In this concluding section, we attempt to answer these questions by summarizing our findings.

In our study, we have identified the following trends:

First of all, as mentioned earlier, changes in local government structure in the past had very limited effect on village society. These changes either empowered traditional rural elites or remained unnoticed. The democratic transition of the 1990s, however, expanded the avenues for political parties to penetrate village society, and studies conducted in the early 2000s indicated that such penetration had become more extensive and hegemonic. Partisan control over village societies started to intensify as the Awami League, after coming to power, adopted a dominant party state (DPS) approach. A major shift occurred in 2015, when it was decided that in local-level elections—both at UP and Upazila Parishad levels—party symbols would be required to contest the elections. This compelled local elites who wished to participate in elections to embrace party identities, and consequently, party alignment became a major source of power. Even though members of the UP could still contest without party symbols, in order to gain access to public resources, they were required to maintain a good working relationship with the UP chair, which eventually encouraged them to align with political parties. In other words, over the last two decades, the local power structure

has largely transformed into a mirror image of the national power structure.

Secondly, another key trend we observed in the villages that we have studied is that the roles and functions of the UP in day-to-day village life have increased significantly. For various purposes—whether obtaining a birth certificate to enrol children in school, securing a licence to conduct business, or accessing different social safety net programs—village dwellers now need to visit the UP or the UDCs set up at the UP. Furthermore, their reliance on UP members has intensified. As our study shows, across all villages in the country, villagers need to connect with members to gain access to services. While this has enabled services to be delivered closer to villagers' doorsteps, it has also necessitated maintaining close relationships with ruling party activists in order to get in touch with members or to access services from the UP. Even in the case of dispute resolution, village dwellers have shifted from traditional shalish mediated by village elders to shalish led by the chairs and members who have assumed the responsibility to mediate disputes, along with other political party elites. Additionally, the nature of shalish outcomes is increasingly influenced by commercial transactions, largely governed by political elites.

However, the question remains—has this new mode of service delivery (through the UP) improved citizens' access to services? Our study reveals mixed results. In the case of obtaining necessary documents, citizens' lives have indeed become easier as they no longer need to travel to the district or

the upazila. Nevertheless, they pointed out that, to expedite the process, lobbying through the members (or their supporters) or influential political leaders is still required. Access to social safety net programs remains largely politically controlled, with significant inclusion and exclusion errors. Digitization of service delivery has not yet diminished the importance of “Tadbir,” as has been reflected in other studies as well (Ahmed et al., 2023). In the case of dispute resolution, we have seen that reliance on formal institutions such as Village Courts or Subordinate Courts remains limited. During interviews, villagers from Cumilla and Jamalpur reported that they rarely witnessed Village Courts in action. In most villages, shalish remains the primary mechanism for dispute resolution, but the shalishkars have changed—traditional respectable elites have been replaced by chairs, members, and politically powerful individuals. While elders still express nostalgia for the efficacy of traditional shalish conducted by traditional elites, most villagers challenge that view. They argue that, despite several shortcomings in the current shalish system, it at least allows citizens—irrespective of class or gender—to speak and present their cases. Although villagers in most areas grudgingly accept the outcomes, our study shows that, in villages where people are relatively more educated and affluent, the tendency to resort to formal courts is increasing when they are dissatisfied with the outcomes of shalish.

Thirdly, as society becomes increasingly politicized and a single party tends to dominate the power structure, it is

interesting to note that the villages of Bangladesh have developed coping mechanisms. While national-level politics remains largely confrontational, at the village level, parties have learned to co-exist. Influential and powerful families often maintain close ties with both parties and rarely antagonize the ruling party. Furthermore, at the village level, political parties negotiate with one another to exercise and maintain control. For instance, in one village in Cumilla, the UP chair was quite popular and had been elected twice, even though he did not represent the ruling party. In the last election (held in 2022), the local MP called him and made it clear that he should not contest the election. He had no option but to oblige. When local leaders in the village—whom he had previously represented—heard about this, they reached out to the potential new UP chair. These leaders, although representing the main opposition party, told him he would receive their unconditional support. However, they requested that, in exchange, one of their leaders be allowed to become a member. The potential new chair agreed to this arrangement. Similar tendencies are observed in other villages as well. In a dominant party state, where the regime can exercise extensive control, village societies usually rally behind the winning candidate from the ruling party and pledge support—even if they belong to the opposition. The chair and members often reach an understanding with leaders of the opposition in exchange for their unconditional loyalty. The outcome of such arrangements is the maintenance of social order.

Finally, an important finding of our study is that the characteristics and sources of power of rural elites have undergone significant changes. In the past, wealth—mostly in the form of land property—was a major determinant of elite status in villages, alongside family lineage. Education and religiosity, along with kinship networks, served as supporting factors for maintaining this position. While association with politics was beneficial, it was not among the primary determinants. Over time, with the opening of diversified employment opportunities and improved connections between villages and towns, economic empowerment began to take root in rural areas, reducing reliance on agro-based employment. As a result, the importance of land, along with that of family status, started to decline. Nevertheless, wealth remained a significant determinant of elite status, although its source shifted away from land ownership. Migrants began to play an increasingly prominent role in the social structure during this transitional period. These new elites, through their accumulated wealth, entered into social competition. Concurrently, with the political changes in Bangladesh—especially due to policies introduced by two successive military-backed governments—village-level politics gained prominence. Consequently, political involvement became a defining factor for elites at the village level. During this time, elites were highly engaged in local-level politics. It is important to note that in some villages, traditional elites recognized the broader political transformations and responded by sending their children to schools or universities in Dhaka or by diversifying their income

sources. In cases where traditional elites successfully adapted to these changes, they managed to retain their influence; where they failed, they disappeared from the power structure.

After 2014, the politicization of elites intensified as policies concerning local government elections began to allow the use of party political symbols. Political factionalism among social elites has become increasingly prominent in rural Bangladesh. Simultaneously, new elites emerged who managed to combine their political connections with newly acquired wealth derived from remittances. These new political elites generally do not rely on family status or kinship networks. Table 6 below shows how the nature and sources of power have changed over time:

Table 6.1. Determinants of Elites by Decades

Decade of 1970s	Decade of 1980	Decade of 1990s	Decade of 2000	Decade of 2010+
Family status/ Bangsha (****)	Family status/ Bangsha (**)	Family status/ Bangsha (*)	Family status/ Bangsha (*)	
Land as a base of wealth (****)	Land as a base of wealth (***)	Land as a base of wealth (**)	Land as a base of wealth (*)	Land as a base of wealth (*)
Network (kinship-based) (****)	Network (kinship- based) (**)	Network (based on kinship and political patronage) (**)	Network (based on kinship and political patronage) (**)	Network (based on kinship and political patronage) (**)
	New types of wealth (**)	New types of wealth (**)	New types of wealth (***)	New types of wealth (***)
	Political connection (*)	Political connection (****)	Political connection(****)	Political connection(*****)

It is important to note that this study was conducted before the July Uprising. Post-uprising Bangladesh is now navigating a new political reality, in which the existing dominant party structure is no longer in place. It remains unclear how the uprising

has affected rural areas, particularly in terms of sociopolitical dynamics. It is quite likely that another round of village studies will be necessary to capture this new reality.

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