The role of local self-government institution for deepening democracy at the grass-root level in Bangladesh

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The structure and function of local government of Bangladesh underwent changes during the British and Pakistani rules as well as there had been several changes made to the structure of the local government bodies in the name of decentralization after independence. The institution of local government can help to establish and deepen democratic process and practice as well as ensure participatory development. This paper is an attempt to know how local government is deepening democratic maturity at the grass-root level through the Union Parishad. The study has been conducted depending on secondary information sources. This study focused on several important procedures which deepen democracy at the grass-root level such as universal franchise, secret ballot, periodic election; people’s participation, accountability and transparency. The paper suggested some strategies such as women empowerment through practice, visible auditing system, community participation in standing committees, participatory open budget mobilizing local own resources, effective coordination which could be more effective to strengthen Union Parishad for propagating of local democracy in Bangladesh.

Key words: Local self-government institution, participatory democracy, Union Parishad, grass-root level.

INTRODUCTION

Local self-government has been repeatedly identified as a key strategic sector for improving governance and development in Bangladesh. It plays an important role in initiating and implementing development programs; disputes resolution or providing judicial redress through village courts to local disputes to the people at the grassroots level. But the local bodies have always been subjected to the domination of the bureaucrats and the national level politicians, since the inception of the system (Hussain, 2003). This problem is created due to not establishing values of local self-government. Decentralization of local government institution can create proper values for local self-government through creating political leadership, ensuring popular participation and developing an accountable administration that helps to plan and implement people-oriented development process. It is not only a political process of creating accountability but also is the best means to bring government closer to people and institutionalizing democracy. These values are the criteria that allow us...
to evaluate the profundity of local democracy and acknowledge it as a highly viable vehicle through which democratic processes and practices can be established and participatory development is ensured in Bangladesh (Ehsan, 2003). There is almost universal agreement that local self-government has become a key element in democratic processes and practices can be established to acknowledge it as a highly viable vehicle through which to evaluate the profundity of local democracy and strengthen democracy in a country. It helps to understood democracy spirit and value among the rural people in Bangladesh. Local government has a tremendous role to play in the efficacious existence and maturation, syndromes of democracy (Akintdele and Olaopo, 2002: 145). The people can taste the fruit of democracy by taking part in the local institution as the involvement of citizens in the political process is an essential part of democracy. Local governance involves ordinary citizens assessing their own needs and participating in local project planning and budget monitoring and participation to work, transparency of government information is needed, as well as the inclusion of members into decision-making from groups whose concerns are being addressed. Excluding the weak and powerless from decision-making is a cause of poverty because it denies those rights and creates an unequal power relationship which is the contrary to the values deepening democracy. Local self-government has become a key element in Bangladesh political systems mainly for two reasons. Firstly, local government bodies are exercising democratic norms and values independently since the independence and the principles and practice of democracy are learnt, developed and reinforced most effectively in the context of local politics, where participation is relatively easy and the rewards more immediate. Secondly, offering the delivery of some services such as education, welfare, local infrastructural development and ensuring social security through social safety programs.

Local government of Bangladesh has a long history, during the British colonial rule and after 1947 during the long quasi-colonial rule, various kinds of changes had taken to form local self government body in a democratic way and to ensure peoples participation and after the independence of Bangladesh. It tried to consolidate democracy in every tier of local self government, but it had been stumbled several times. A number of attempts have been made at devolution of authority to local bodies in the past and changes have been made time to time but the initiatives did not have direct linkage with strengthening local government bodies but owing to various constrains, these were frustrated. One main reason for this was the instability of national government (Siddiqui, 2005: 289). However, it is known that democracy cannot succeed until it is built on the foundation from grass root levels (Islam et al., 2004: 56). Union Parishad as a unit of local self government body reflects the will of the people through integrated approach of socio-economic development adopted which are quit visible at the grass root level. It has been playing strengthening democratic culture through universal franchise, secret ballot, periodic election, people’s participation and increasing people’s political consciousness and elected people representative interact with the local people to find out solutions.

Objectives of the paper

The objective of this article is to give explanation of the capacity of Union Parishad as a body of local self-government for deepening democratic maturity at the grass-root level in Bangladesh. Specific objectives of the study are:

1. To illustrate the contribution of Union Parishad as a unit local government institution for developing democratic practice at the grass-root level.
2. To identify existing problems in local body and make suggestion for the democratic progress at the grass root level in Bangladesh.

METHODS OF THE STUDY

The study followed qualitative analysis of trends and patterns in documents depending on secondary source and analyzed based on the existing literature. Methodological filters were applied to confine the literature through segregation criteria of the systematic review. The search strategy was followed to control variables of the study. The secondary data have been collected from the various text books and published research reports, various works related to local government which is entirely appropriate and wholly adequate to draw answer the objectives of this paper. Besides, information has been presented in this study on the basis of various works, which focused on the local government system and democratic development. The study also used data from different website.

LOCAL SELF-GOVERNMENT IN BANGLADESH

Local self-government is defined in the Encyclopedia of Social Sciences as “the government, which has a territorial non-sovereign community having/possessing the legal right and the necessary organization to regulate its own affairs” (Komal, 2005: 285). Local self-government means an intra-sovereign governmental unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities, composed of persons elected in accordance with law and subordinate to the state government (Al-Hossienie et al., 2012:82). It is basically an organized social entity with a feeling of oneness. Local self-government means an intra-sovereign governmental unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities and subordinate to the state government (Jahan, 1997:92). Local government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law (GOB, 1993:43). In political terms, it concerns the governance of a specific local area, constituting a political sub-division of a nation, state or other major political unit.
In the performance of its functions, it acts as the agent of the state. In other words, the local government is an integral part of the political mechanism for governance in a country. Then, as body corporate with juristic person, it represents a legal concept (Muttalib and Khan, 1983:2). The United Nations Organization (UNO) defines Local Government as “reference to a political subdivision of a nation or a state which is constituted by low and has substantial control over local affairs, including the power to impose taxes, on exact labor for prescribed purposes. The governing body of such an entity is elected or locally selected” (UNO).

Local government is an integral part of the whole governance process which performs many, similar functions such as, agriculture, health, education infrastructure development etc., within their legal jurisdictions. The scale and scope of these activities are, however, limited; but being closer to the community the development activities and the services provided by the local government institutions can have immediate impact on their lives (Hussain, 2003).

Local democracy; conceptual perspective

Local democracy has multiple meanings in various settings, and there is no single concept or model of the “best” form of democracy. At the same time, there is a general understanding about the essential processes of democratic life that apply universally. Democracy means that there should be periodic (or regular) and genuine elections and that power can and should change hands through popular suffrage and not coercion and force. In democracies, political opponents and minorities have a right to express their views and have influence (i.e., more than just achieve representation) in the policy-making process. When minority views cannot be accommodated, opposition should be legal and loyal and not extra-institutional and violent. There should be the opportunity for alternation in governing coalitions; that is, voters should be able to remove certain politicians from office and replace them with new leadership. Democracy means that there should be respect and protection for basic civil and political rights. Some cultures may have a tradition of citizen participation, whereas in others people may be more deferential to appointed or elected authorities (Timothy, 2001). Overall, democratic local government could be characterized by four essential features: its openness towards the citizens, its fairness in treating them, the transparency of its structures and procedures, and its responsiveness to the needs of its citizens. The following components are the key components of local democracy;

Citizenship and community

Local community participation is the corner-stone of modern notions of citizenship because its institutions and decision-making procedures may allow for a more direct form of democracy in which the voices of ordinary individuals can be heard most easily (Timothy, 2001). Brager et al. (1987) defined participation as a means to educate citizens and to increase their competence. It is a vehicle for influencing decisions that affect the lives of citizens and an avenue for transferring political power. Armitage (1988) defined citizen participation as a process by which citizen’s act in response to public concerns, voice their opinions about decisions that affect them, and take responsibility for changes to their community.

Deliberation

Democracy is more than elections. It involves meaningful dialogue, debate, and discussion in an effort to solve problems that arise in the community. Deliberation is more than listening to citizens’ complaints. A truly deliberative democracy is a give-and-take dialogue among all interest groups in a community about the key decisions and actions they face together (Timothy, 2001).

Political education

Local democracy facilitates “political education”. That is, citizen participation allows individuals to gain knowledge about community affairs that otherwise reside with elected public officials and professional city administrators. More informed and educated citizens make democracy – decision-making by the people – possible and more effective. Participation is about closing the gap between the political “elite” and members of the community (Timothy, 2001).

Good government and social welfare

John Stuart Mill and other advocates of participatory democracy at the local level argued that unlocking the virtue and intelligence of the populace would foster good government and promote social welfare. That is, democracy tends to enhance good relations among the citizens, building a community that is self-reliant and public-spirited (Timothy, 2001).

Importance of local self-government in democratic learning

During the early British rule, local government functionaries were chosen by appointment and nomination from among local residents by the District Magistrate, acting as the national government representative at the field level. Later on the elective mechanism was introduced
partially. Thus, in appointing local government functionaries, the people of the concerned locality would show their support to a particular candidate by raising hands publicly. The one obtaining the majority of the ‘Open Votes’ was appointed (Kamal, 2005:316). But at present, in modern states there is a great importance of the local self-government because the burden of the provincial and central government is lessened by it. Local Self Government is also essential for the success of central democratic spirit. These institutions impart training to the citizens in the running of the government. Moreover, democracy is made real in local self-government. French political thinker and historian Alexis De Touquville observes, the local assemblies of citizens constitute the strength of free nations (Agarwal, 2009). Democracy is a form of government which operates the mechanism on the basis of majority consent. Form this point of view local self-government is much more effective for democratic practice and maturation. Democracy develops and is an elevator of the masses, and some people claim that local government is good for national democracy (Siddique, 2005). Local government provides valuable training ground for national leaders. It is the ardent example of ground of political activities and political activities inherent in local government namely elections, rule-making, political pressure, publicity and public debate, closing the gap between the citizen and the administration (Siddique, 2005). In the present context of Bangladesh, strengthening local democracy means, most of all, (a) greater representation of the poor and women (who constitute the vast majority of the population) in the leadership of local government bodies; (b) effective pursuit of the common interests of the poor and women in the local government bodies once this new leadership emerges (Siddiqui, 2005:319). Women constitute about 49 percent of the total population in Bangladesh (Peter and Mia, 2006: 28). But their participation in the political process in Bangladesh is extremely limited. Despite various efforts the role of women in political affair has not yet been improved. Local Self-Government (LSG) system in this respect can play a major role to empower women at grassroots level (Al – Hossienie et al., 2012:01). The Constitution of Bangladesh in Article 59 and Article 60 lays down a framework for local government bodies. Article 59(1) provides that “Local Government in every administrative unit of the Republic shall be entrusted to bodies, composed of persons elected in accordance with law”. Article 59(2) provides the broad functions of local government as: ‘administration and the work of public officers; the maintenance of public order; the preparation and implementation of plans relating to public services and economic development’. Article 60 stipulates that ‘For the purpose of giving full effect to the provisions of Article 59 Parliament shall by law, confer powers on the local government bodies referred to in that article, including power to impose taxes for local purposes, to prepare their budgets and to maintain funds’. In addition to these two articles, Article 11 of the Constitution provides as a Fundamental Principle of State Policy that ‘the Republic shall be a democracy in which...effective participation by the people through their elected representatives in administration at all levels shall be ensured’.

Union Parishad (UP) in this context has been playing a major role to empower women and enhance the potential of women in socio-political context. The Union Parishad is such a political platform which gives ample opportunity and necessary space to women to participate in social, economic, and political activities at the grassroots level, even at the remote corner of the country (Al – Hossienie et al., 2012:01). Professor Laski says, “The institution of local government is educative to perhaps a higher degree than any other part of government” (Agarwal, 2009). Through local self-institutions the spirit of the performance of duties and responsibilities is inculcated among the citizen. Lord Bryce says, ‘local institutions not only impart training to the citizens in public affairs, but they also train them to work along with the other people. These institutions inculcate the spirit of intellect appropriateness, justice and social spirit which is essential for the success of democracy (Agarwal, 2009)’. Moreover, the first function which local government is said to perform for the democratic state is political education to the citizens as well as it gives additional opportunities for voting forming political associations and exercising freedom of speech (Siddique, 2005). Thus, the local self-government from the various points of view is obviously conducive for the propagation of democracy through the democratic practice at the local level. Inaugurating the first Local Self-government Ministers Conference (India) in 1948, the then Prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru observed that “Local Self-Government is and must be the basis of any true system of democracy. We have got rather into the habit of thinking of democracy at the top and not so much at the bottom. Democracy at the top may not be a success unless you build on its foundation from below” (Agarwal, 2009: 399).

**Gradual expansion of local self-government institutions in deepening democracy**

Democracy is the opinion of majority, that means the sovereignty of the people and it is not meant for people who are more for the comforts and pleasure of life than for freedom and equality (Suda, 1995: 353). Local governments have no relevance if they are not responsive, transparent, participatory and accountable to the people and any program of local self government is very significant contributor to democratic development of the state (Islam et al., 2004: 64). Union Parishad has an important role to play in democratic promotion in Bangladesh since the independence as an important
component of local self-government. It explores the responsible leader at the local level through ensuring participation of people as a part of government as well as extended the political learning among the peoples (Ahmed, 2000). In 1973, Union Parishad elections were held in Bangladesh following the new act but there were no initiatives to reorganize Thana Parishad or Zilla Parishad (Muhit, 2002). The Thana and the district level relief comities were also formed by giving nomination to the party supporters (Rahman and Zaman, 2004: 75). At all levels of the Local Self Government the party in power tried to set the party activists. There were no steps towards democratizations of local self government, but a little improvement had occurred in Union Parishad that time. On November 20, 1976 Local Government Ordinance was promulgated. Under the ordinance, Union Parishad, Thana Parishad and Zilla Parishad were created (Rahman and Zaman, 2004:76). Union Parishad election was held in 1977 but other tiers of local bodies were untouched and ineffective. There was no opportunity of people’s participation at local government and even in the national level except Union Parishad. In 1987, an initiative was taken to set up Thana Committee (TC) but it was not implemented. The formation of the Gram Sarkar (Village Government) by the central government was highly politically motivated (Rahman and Zaman, 2004: 77). In 1982, the old Thana Parishad was upgraded into Upazila and a date of election was fixed up by the then government. But it was not realistic and accepted by all because of its political motives. The responsibility to expense about 10 percent of national budget had been decentralized upon Upazila. Since the democracy was absent at the national level, there was no scope to establish democratic government at Upazila level (Muhit, 2002: 48). In 1991, the government abolished the politically formed Zilla Parishad and Upazila Parishad and it was appreciated by the people that time. The government took the initiatives to form Upazila and Zilla Parishad in a democratic way but the effort was confined only formulating planning not in practice. In 1996, the government declared that they would take action to organize local self government institutions democratically (Rahman and Zaman, 2004: 79). Some mentionable steps had been taken and reform of Union Parishad was done in a more democratic way. Union Parishad was divided into 9 wards and 9 members were elected; three sets for women members, who were elected through a competitive direct election. There was a provision of Village Council (VC). In 1997, Union Parishad elections were held through-out the country but Village Council elections were not held (Muhit, 2002: 49). In 1998, Uphazil Parishad Act was promulgated and Zilla Parishad Act was passed on July, 2000, but there had no initiatives conducting election at these two tiers (Muhit, 2002: 49). Government of Bangladesh in line with the Constitutional spirit has recently enacted a new law called Union Parishad Act 2009 replacing the old Union Parishad Ordinance of 1983. The UP Act of 2009 has rightly recognized the importance of community participation, transparency and accountability by including specific sections on formation of ward committees, participatory planning, access to information, and extended authority of the Standing Committee etc. It is indeed that, the local self government bodies are the basic units of democracy and the development agent of the nation. These units are the best ground of democratic practice in the country (Rahman and Zaman, 2004: 80). But since the emergence of Bangladesh, observation has claimed that the periodical government served for its own political gain (Rahman and Zaman, 2004: 81).

Since inception the local government institutions were given the responsibilities for maintenance of law and order, infrastructures development and their maintenance, health, education etc. within their area. Though they had their own sources, they mainly relied on various grants from the government. At present only Union Parishad is an elected local government body. There is no elected body at the Thana level and though Zilla Parishad is a local government at District level there is no elected body for their management. It is found unfortunate that despite having a more than 39 years of existence, local government system has been confronted with some chronic problems. The units have failed to grow as viable institutions to render democratic education properly to the people living in local levels in Bangladesh due to political motive of the leader of the major political parties. As there are lots of obstacles and political motives found for activating upper tiers of local government, Union Parishad has been playing tremendous role to promote democracy at the local level since the independence of Bangladesh. It brings political consciousness among the people; people can easily communicate to their representative, can express opinion strongly, can sustain demand and expectations as well as strongly protest against the activities of representative at the local level through the procedure of Union Parishad. Unlike the definition of democracy by Abraham Lincoln, local government is a government of the local people, by the local people, and for the local people. It is more appropriately applicable for Union Parishad. It is not subordinate body of the central or provincial government.

Composition and functions of Union Parishad of Bangladesh

Divide the rural areas of police station within its jurisdiction separately into a number of areas to be a Union (Union Parishad Act- 1997, Section- 3). Every Union Parishad shall be a body corporate, having perpetual succession and common seal, with power, subject to the rules, to acquire and hold properly both movable and immovable and shall by its name sue and be sued (Union Parishad Act-1997, Section- 4). Union
Parishad shall consist of a chairman and twelve members, of which three members exclusively reserved for women. There shall be reserved three seats exclusively for women members in each Union Parishad. Who shall be elected by direct election on the basis of adult franchise provided that nothing in this subsection shall prevent a woman from being elected to any of the nine general seats provided for in subsection 1 (UP Act-1997: Section- 5). For the purpose of election each Union is divided into nine wards. Each ward elects one member and each woman member elects from three wards. The official term of Union Parishad is five years. All the executive powers of the Union Parishad are vested in the chairman (Ahmed, 1998:30).

In section 38 of The Local Government (Union Parishads) Ordinance, 1983 states that, the Union Parishad can form any committee with prior permission of the authority if it deems necessary. The concept of Union Parishad Standing Committee came from the objective of making the UP more active and efficient. According to the Local Government Union Parishads (Amendment) Acts. 1993 and 2001 each UP will constitute 13 standing committees, one for each of these areas: (a) finance and establishment (b) education and mass education (c) health, family planning and epidemic control (d) audit and accounts (e) agriculture and other development works (f) social welfare and community centers (g) cottage industries and cooperatives (h) law and order (i) welfare of women and children, sports and culture (j) fisheries and livestock (k) conservation of the environment and tree plantation (l) union public works (m) rural water supply and sanitation (Siddiqui, 2005).

A large number of functions have been prescribed in the laws. In practice, however, Union Parishad’s function is usually confined to the following areas; Assessing and collecting taxes; Maintaining law and order through the village police; maintaining birth and death registers, constructing and maintaining roads, bridges, culverts etc; maintaining haat and bazaar; settling local petty disputes; providing assistance for spread of primary education, motivating villagers to send their children to school and supervising school; updating the registration of birth and death based on reports from village councils, awareness creation of child and women development; issue license of different trades and profession; so on (Siddique, 2005:158). Besides, there are more functions performed through UP such as; conducting socio-economic surveys of households (every five years) for development plan preparation; supervise management of primary educational institutes; motivate parents to send their children to school and create better awareness for adult and female literacy; create awareness for better primary health care; maintain law and order and control terrorism, violence against women etc, ensure participation in local and central government development planning; encourage co-operatives and NGOs; initiate participatory development of local roads, bridges, culverts etc, support various development activities related to agriculture; encourage and initiate tree plantation programs. In addition, Union Parishad has been assigned with the adoption and implementation of poverty alleviation programs directly by themselves and through NGOs and co-operatives.

Union Parishad in Bangladesh for promoting grass-root democracy

In the present context of Bangladesh, promotion of local democracy means greater representation of the poor and women in the leadership of local bodies and effective pursuit of the common interests of the poor people and women in the local government bodies so that new leadership emerges. Since 1973, Union Parishad has been constituted democratically though there were some major changes in its structure, composition and functions at different times (Siddiqui, 2005:330). However, the following features are common in Union Parishad area that plays important role to promote democracy at the grass-root level in Bangladesh.

Universal franchise

Free environment for free choice can make a government really and genuinely democratic. Democracy is consent of people where reflection of the will of the people is visible. So universal franchise reflects the will of the people, which is an important piece of equipment of democracy promotion. In Bangladesh, only Union Parishad among all other tiers reflects the will of the people which may have been to the fore in the evolution of representative governance at the grass root level. Union Parishad is designed to democratize the process on the basis of consent of general people through universal franchise.

Periodic election

Election is a method of choosing the people’s representatives and has been recognized as the most legitimate process for filling in various local government positions. If democracy is considered as cherished social goal, democratic values and norms need to be practiced at both national and local levels and direct election at all levels is regular and mandatory for promotion of democracy. At local level it implies, however, access to greater political skills and makes people conscious of their right and duties. Since independence, periodic election has been conducting in Union Parishad. Grass-roots people are used to get test of democracy after every five years. Though a longer period of time democracy was absent in national level, there was no problem holding election at the local level at Union Parishad.
Effective and equal participation

Local bodies explore the responsible leader at the local level through ensuring participation of people as a part of government (Ahmed, 2000; 394). It extended political learning among the peoples (Ahmed 2000; 395). Elected directly by the voters and equipped with the operations of women oriented development programs, the women representative will be in better position to actively participate in the decision making process. Attitudes towards participation of women in politics have been positively directed so that women in greater numbers get opportunities to participate in politics.

Bilateral contact

Direct contact between electors and their representatives stimulates enthusiasm in public affairs and develops a sense of public spirit. As Union Parishad is small and with a small portion of population, electorates have a chance to contact their representative. Thus, bilateral contact between both people and representative is important to carry on democratic values at the grass-root level in Bangladesh.

Representation: Union Parishad consists of people’s representatives and concerns the main currents of popular opinion. It has been playing an important role reflecting the demands and supports of its locality and electorate.

Accountability: The Union Parishad can play a vital role in implementing the programs of the national government, such as population control, tree plantation, crop diversification, compulsory primary education, and health for all. In fact Union Parishad is the most important tier for implementing any government programme. The Union Parishad can also be an effective organ in tapping local resources (Siddiqui, 2005:331-332). Therefore, the representatives of Union Parishad are directly accountable for legal, financial, social activities to the people of that locality.

Responsiveness: An elected authority has a greater incentive to develop and extend the practice of local consultation and to experiment with new forms than a non-elected one, thus increasing the likelihood of responsiveness (Beetham, 1996: 37). Union Parishad has to respond more effectively to local needs, interests and opinion. The diversity of local circumstances and needs, it is argued, requires diverse local responses, which are best devised by those with local knowledge and experience. Union Parishad representatives and officers are more likely to have such local knowledge and experience and, furthermore, are more accessible to local people who wish to bring issues to their attention and to lobby them.

Solidarity: Through the activities of Union Parishad it creates solidarity to take sides with a group of people who are oppressed and exploited by a power that they are trying to counteract. In addition, it creates a fellowship arising from common responsibilities and interests, as between members of institution and the different classes and peoples to promote harmony in respective localities of Union Parishad.

Existing threats for democratic progress of Union Parishad

Although local self-government body has been strongly performing to strengthen democratic norms and values at local level, it faces various problems. First, Limited understanding of functions of local self-government body held by population at large. Community members are rarely consulted and have low expectations of what the local self-government body will accomplish. Besides, relationship between elected representatives and local officials is characterized by mutual mistrust, suspicion and even hostility, but this does not preclude collusion where this is in the mutual interest of the parties concerned. Second, women members are generally excluded from major decision-making arenas. Local self-government body membership does not itself provide any guarantee of influence over the activities in which the body engages as the chairman is placed in a relatively powerful position, and often takes decisions in conjunction with a small circle of associates, from which women members, in particular are likely to be excluded. Third, members of local self-government body are only partially aware of their formally prescribed responsibilities, and in many cases lack the skills and resources required to discharge those functions. Fourth, it has limited capacity and incentive to raise revenue and is therefore highly dependent upon central government grants. Moreover, there are some disadvantages too, for example, there are no in built arrangements to solve the conflict of interest between chairman and members. It has been observed that the lack of harmonious relationship among the people’s representatives that has brought to a grinding halt. Another major shortcoming is the absence of institutional arrangements for accounting and auditing. No viable system of auditing has been introduced so far to cope with the large number of local self-government. The local self-government functionaries tend to misappropriate public money and the large number of local bodies also restricted monitoring and supervision of their development activities (Siddiqui, 2005:332).Therefore these problems must be overcome and democratic activists and external supporters must be ensured to ensure commitment and grassroots
spontaneity through some strategic planning and dynamic tactical skills for deepening democracy at the grass-root level.

Towards a matured democratic Union Parishad

The following suggestion may be effective as to the best course of action to solve the existing problems in local government body. These recommendations could be actively considered by any competent authority in the field of local level politics.

First, women’s representatives are confined at their work, so their rights and dignity should be ensured in Union Parishad and following the Upazila Parishad model; a position of a Female Vice Chairman may also be created. This will ensure further women representation and allow the Chairman to delegate some of the development functions. Besides, ward based development meting should be conducted on regular basis so that participation of people can be spontaneous and enlarged. Moreover, coordination is an important tool of development so the relationship between the government officials and the Parishad should have a sound coordination and helpful attitude to each other and unnecessary interruption over it must be detached as if its autonomy be ensured in practice.

Second, accountability and transparency at the local level must be in a visible manner. Auditing system, for this purpose, can be initiated and all the units should be embodied properly according to Laws and Acts. That is why; institutional capacity and human resources must be developed in Union Parishad. With this purpose, accountant and a draftsman should immediately be staffed in Union Parishad. Provision of adequate logistic support should be provided in Union Parishad.

Third, Union Parishad can be made capable of absorbing and managing additional financial resources to undertake both conventional and non-conventional development activities. Besides, Union Parishad can be made capable of mobilizing additional own resources for its own development activities with new innovative techniques and delegated authority.

Forth, both Union Parishad representatives and government officials recognized that in order to provide better services there is a need for effective coordination between Union Parishad representatives and government official both at Upazila level as well as at field level. Various Upazila level committees of the respective line agencies need to be activated under the supervision of the Upazila Parishad.

Five, By law every Union Parishad must form 13 Standing Committees (SC) concerning different areas of its operational and developmental activities. But in most cases such SCs are formed as “ritual” than as a necessity. Activating such SCs could significantly enhance the service delivery in respective areas of community need. The SCs by inducting co-opted members from the community and also from the line agency representatives could make a substantive contribution to the quality of management, supervision and monitoring of the development activities of the UP. There is also a need to ensure effective coordination between standing committee and government official so that the line agencies can synchronize their development activities and extension programmes in line with the priorities and demand of the UP.

Six, an effective linkage should be established between Upazilla and Union Parishad in order to ensure effective service of government official in terms of reporting system, monitoring and evaluation. They should create an opportunity to discuss the service delivery loophole and allegation in Upazila Parishad meetings.

Seven, Union Parishad have been practicing participatory open budget to ensure transparency acknowledging the community peoples’ demand. Open budget is an innovative initiative to ensure transparency which also recognizes the aspirations and needs of the community. It also reduces the external political pressure to divert Union Parishad fund for personal gains. Besides, Union Parishad has the potential to mobilize ‘social capital’ i.e, women, community members, union facilitators to ensure ‘social accountability” and “quality assurance” of the delivery of services.

Eight, NGOs and civil society bodies should undertake awareness programme to make community members more aware about the “Citizen Charter” on Union Parishad. As a policy decision Government should encourage the NGOs to be engaged in undertaking ‘social audit’ of the performance of the Union Parishad. There is a need for framing an appropriate policy and corresponding rules and regulations to institutionalize the relationship between the Union Parishad and government agencies /NGOs, and the private sector to undertake some social service and income generation programmes for the community. Union Parishad has all potential to be more “responsive” to community needs and “accountable” to the community at large with appropriate “watch dog” role of community, and higher level of community participation has enhanced quality and durability of UP projects. Union Parishad’s complex could be developed as a ‘development hub’ with better coordination, collaboration of field level GOB extension agencies/workers and UP elected official including the UP Standing Committees.

Conclusion

Democratic society largely depends on decentralization of powers and the local self-government implies the decentralization of powers so that the elected bodies may function independently with authority and resources to bring about economic development and social justice. Democracy is not an event but a complex and continuous process; it is essential that its inception and development are properly managed and nurtured. Therefore,
democracy requires careful strategy, meticulous planning and dedicated civically trained detail oriented individuals to carry out the related responsibilities (Maskanian, Bahram). In modern states there is a great importance of the local self-government bodies which impart training to the citizens in the running of the government (Agarwal, 2009). Advocates of decentralization in developing countries argue that bringing government closer to the people will make it more responsive and hence more likely to develop policies and outputs which meet the needs of ordinary citizens — the majority of whom are "the poor". However, it is also true that without a real devolution of authority, local governments will find it hard to be effective in addressing the developmental needs, poverty and the cry for good governance at the grass roots. Lord Bryce says that local institutions not only impart training to the citizens in public affairs but they also train them to work along with other people (Agarwal, 2009). Therefore, it is said that "the Local Self-Government is termed as the government of the local People, by the local People and for the local People. It can be said that without a sound system of democracy at the base levels, democracy and form of government cannot have firm roots at the apex (Islam et al., 2004). What is therefore needed is a strong political will to install an effective and truly decentralized local government system. The study reveals that local self government has been playing an important role to develop democratic culture at the local level. The local people can participate periodically election and can choose right representative. Union Parishad has a tremendous role in terms of promoting such conditions at the local level because only it has been running without obstacle since the beginning. Therefore, central government should provide more specific allocation to Union Parishad to implement local development projects; thus it will be more effective as a democratic institution with the participation of mass people. Because, In Bangladesh, Only Union Parishad is a single unit formulated through democracy is completing self-governed institutions (Hasan, 2004). In fact, countries that have developed efficient local government systems have had to take hard policy decisions, which in most cases, were not politically popular.

Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interest.

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Local self-government means an intra-sovereign governmental unit within the sovereign state dealing mainly with local affairs, administered by local authorities, composed of persons elected in accordance with law and subordinate to the state government.

Union Parishad is the lowest tier of administrative unit in Bangladesh. An elected local government body exists at the union level. According to LG (UP) Ordinance, 1983, ‘union’ means ‘a rural area’ declared to be a union under section 3 (Declaration of union and alteration of limits thereof) [GOB, 1990: 2-3]. The Union Parishad consists of a chairman, nine members, and three women members. The voters of the Union Parishad directly elect all.

Available on Maskanian, Bahram, “The Six Essential Components for Democracy” http://www.venusproject.org/keywords/the-six-essential-components-for-democracy.html