



A brief review of urban-local bodies and citizen charter in Bangladesh

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Abstract

This article examines the historical evolution of both Urban Local Government (ULG) and Rural Local Government (RLG) structures in Bangladesh, alongside the introduction of the Citizen Charter at different points in time. It explores the various local government bodies, including urban and rural councils, municipal corporations, and district councils, analyzing their rules and regulations as defined by the existing local government Acts. The study investigates whether these Acts restrict the powers and functions of local governments. In essence, it examines the institutional and legal frameworks that govern local governments in Bangladesh. Additionally, the article explores the context surrounding the introduction of the Citizen Charter in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Rural local government institutions, colonial legacy, union parishad, upazilla parishad, paurashava, local government, Bangladesh, citizen charter

Introduction

Bangladesh's urban landscape is rapidly transforming. Efficient management of this growth depends heavily on well-functioning Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) that are accountable to the citizens they serve. The Citizen Charter emerges as a promising tool in this regard, outlining service delivery standards and fostering a more transparent relationship between citizens and ULBs. This article explores the interplay between these two crucial elements – ULBs and Citizen Charters – in Bangladesh's urban governance framework. We will delve into the structure and responsibilities of ULBs, followed by an examination of Citizen Charters and their potential to bridge the gap between service delivery and citizen expectations. The discussion will also touch upon the challenges and opportunities associated with implementing Citizen Charters effectively in Bangladesh's urban context.

Literature Review

Despite a wealth of literature exploring the intricacies of local government, a definitive understanding of its impact remains elusive. Prior research has meticulously examined the structure and function of local governance, yet a consensus on its influence appears lacking. This gap in knowledge spurred my investigation, aiming to illuminate the tangible effects of local government on the communities it serves.

Objective of study

This research aims to analyze Bangladesh's urban local government structure and the recent introduction of the Citizen Charter. It will examine the various local government systems, including both self-governing bodies in urban and rural areas and local administrative structures. The study will delve into the existing laws and regulations governing these bodies, such as the Acts for Union Parishads, Upazila Parishads, Zila Parishads, Paurashavas, and City Corporations. Additionally, it will investigate the circumstances surrounding the implementation of the Citizen Charter.

Methodology of study

This study employs a qualitative approach, relying on content analysis of various secondary sources. The research draws on a comprehensive review of existing literature on local governance and decentralization in Bangladesh. Sources include books, articles from national and international journals, newspaper reports, recent local government acts, policy documents, and reports from relevant ministries and development partners. Additionally, web documents and other existing literature were examined. This in-depth analysis provided the author with a thorough understanding of the overall local government system in Bangladesh. By critically examining current trends and the introduction of the Citizen's Charter, the author identified what functions effectively, what areas need improvement and the underlying cause of these issues. Notably, the study incorporates a historical approach to understand the development of rural local government, a crucial aspect of Bangladesh's local governance structure. This historical analysis primarily relies on secondary sources like books, government gazettes, journals, articles, reports, and newspapers, all meticulously cross-checked for accuracy. Data analysis involved manual aggregation of relevant information extracted from these sources.

A Brief Review of the Evolution and Present State of Urban Local Government Bodies in Bangladesh

Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan share a long history of Urban Local Government (ULG), evident in their current structures. To grasp the present state of ULG in Bangladesh, with its diverse bodies like Paurashavas (dating back to the Mughals), Municipalities, and Parishads, we must explore their historical transformations, from ancient roots to their role in a modern democratic Bangladesh.

1. The Formative Period of Local Government

The trends and issues of local government in the subcontinent have a long historical root. In the historic Vedic period, the existence of participatory local government bodies such as Gram janapads and Panchkula were established that were administered by the democratically elected personnel in rural Indian village

republics ^[1]. In ancient Bengal, the Panchayat was established as a local government unit in Indian subcontinent ^[2]. Subsequently, such type of indigenous local organization could not last long because of the existence of the perennial colonial rule in the subcontinent.

2. The Mughal Era

The Mughal era (1524-1856) is considered a pivotal period in the development of local government in the Indian subcontinent, laying the groundwork for what we see in Bangladesh today. The Mughals are credited with establishing the first ever urban local government system in the region ^[3]. Their focus was on developing towns with wards and mohallas administered by Mir Mahallas, who represented the population ^[4]. A high-ranking official, the Kotwal, acted as the city governor, wielding broad managerial, police, and fiscal powers ^[5]. The Kotwal appointed Mir Mahallas for each ward, who kept records of houses, markets, and other essential services ^[5]. While the Mughals made strides in urban governance, it was a top-down system lacking citizen's participation.

3. British Colonial Period (1757-1947)

The British colonial era in India saw a dramatic shift from the traditional Mughal administration. They implemented a centralized system and focused heavily on urban development. This focus on trade and commerce led to the flourishing of cities and towns. To manage this growth, the British enacted the Municipal Administration Act of 1793, establishing formal urban administrations in the three major Presidency Towns: Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta ^[6]. As per the provision of the section 158 of the act, justice of the peace was appointed to discharge the responsibility for ensuring access to city houses and land, appointing Chowkidars and arranging scavenging and the repair of roads in these cities ^[7]. In 1813, Dhaka, the capital of the present day Bangladesh became the first town in Bengal with the power to impose taxes that was further extended to other towns of Bengal ^[8]. These cities became the center of excellence for the development of other big cities in the region for establishing municipalities. Thus, in 1814, ward committees were set up in other big cities.

The Village Chowkidari Act, 1870, enacted for the Bengal Presidency (not specifically rural Bengal), focused on establishing a system for appointing, dismissing, and maintaining village watchmen (chowkidars). Its primary purpose wasn't tax collection, but rather to enhance rural security and reporting of crimes ^[9]. Through this act, several villages formed a union and all the union created the Chowkidari Panchayat organization. These organizations consisted of five government-appointed members for a three-year term. However, they were entrusted with the responsibility of appointment of the Chowkidars (village police) responsible for maintaining the law and order and collecting taxes. Salaries of the chowkidars were paid by the taxes imposed on the villagers ^[10]. In a real sense, the members of Chowkidari Panchayat were regarded as the government officials rather than the representative of the villagers. That is why, Lord Ripon's reform initiative attained was praised by many for being successful in attaining some basic success, though they were regarded as too radical. During 1870 to 1880, the Indian subcontinent experienced some social and economic changes in the local government. The demand for greater share in administration

and public services was raised. In 1882, Bengal Local-self Government Act was adopted and passed in 1885 on the basis of Lord Ripon's Resolution, which was considered as the solid foundation of local government in Indian subcontinent.

4. Pakistan Period (1847-71)

In 1947, the Indian subcontinent divided into two parts- India and Pakistan. The present Bangladesh was a part of the East Pakistan on the basis of an Independent Act of India, 1947. The previous local government of Pakistan was sustained till 1958 and no visible changes were made. In 1958, General Ayub Khan took over the power and established a new system of non-Party local government in the form of The Basic Democracy had four tiers comprised of Union Council, Thana Council, District Council and Divisional Council ^[11]. In 1960, the Municipal Administration Ordinance was enacted intended to bring municipalities in line with the so-called Basic Democracy institution at rural level ^[12]. Under this ordinance, municipal committees, Town committees, union committees and ward committees were set up as a component of urban local government.

5. Bangladesh Period (1971-2018)

Bangladesh's independence in 1971 marked a new era for Urban Local Government (ULG). Since then, all governments have recognized the importance of local bodies in strengthening democracy and delivering essential services. However, the British colonial legacy remains evident, with pre-existing ULG structures forming the base of the system. As a democratic republic, Bangladesh has a two-tiered governance system with national and local governments working in tandem.

6. Legal and Constitutional Foundations for Local Government in Bangladesh

A strong constitutional or legal foundation is essential for an effective local government system. This framework legitimizes local governments and empowers them to function efficiently. In a democratic system, parliament grants autonomy to local governments through legislation or constitutional provisions, enabling them to serve their communities more effectively ^[13]. The present Urban Local Government (ULG) system in Bangladesh is a product of ongoing evolution. Since the country's independence in 1971, ULG has undergone various phases of changes and reforms under different regimes, shaping it into the system we see today

7. Sheikh Mujib Tenure (1972-1975)

Following Bangladesh's liberation war in 1971, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, the nation's founding father, assumed the presidency and embarked on rebuilding the war-torn country. Recognizing the crucial role of local government, the new constitution enshrined a strong mandate for its establishment. Reflecting this commitment, the existing union councils were renamed Panchayats, and administrators were appointed via presidential order (7 of 1972) to manage their affairs ^[14]. At the same time, the name of Thana council was changed as Thana Development Committee, while the district council was renamed as Zila Board or District Board

8. Zia Regime (1976-1981)

General Zia's regime brought significant changes to Bangladesh's local government structure. The Local Government Ordinance of 1976 established a three-tier system: Union Parishads at the union level, Thana Parishads at the sub-district level, and Zila Parishads at the district level. However, these bodies lacked democratic legitimacy as no local elections were held. Instead, government officials managed their operations. To complement the Thana Parishad, a Thana Development Committee was also formed through a notification in 1978^[15]. A new chapter unfolded in Bangladesh's local governance in 1980 with the introduction of "Swanivar Gram Sarker" at the local level. This system, established through an ordinance, marked a distinct shift in the landscape of local governance^[16].

9. Ershad Regime (1982-1990)

General Ershad's rise to power in 1982 through martial law brought a shift in local governance. He abolished the "Swanivar Gram Sarker" system and introduced a new initiative – the Upazila Parishad Ordinance of 1982. This landmark legislation established Upazila Parishads, capturing the interest of rural communities. Unlike previous systems, Upazila Parishads featured directly elected Chairpersons with significant authority for a five-year term. The Upazila Nirbahi Officer, a government official, served in a subordinate role to the elected Chairperson, marking a step towards decentralization^[17]. At the same time, the Local Government (Union Parishad) Ordinance, 1983 and Local Government (Zilla Parishad) Act, 1988 were also issued.

10. Khaleda Zia Regime (1991-1996)

The pendulum of power swung again in 1991. The new government, established after the fall of General Ershad, dismantled the Upazila Parishad system through the Local Government (Upazila Parishad and Upazila Administration Reorganization) (Repeal) Ordinance of 1991. This move effectively abolished the Upazila Parishads, leaving the future of local governance in Bangladesh uncertain^[18]. In November 1991, the government formed a 14-member committee with an aim of reorganizing the local government unit for ensuring participation of the local people in the development activities. The committee submitted its report in 1992, with a number of recommendations, but those were not implemented by the government^[19].

11. Sheikh Hasina Regime (1996-2001)

Bangladesh's local governance landscape continued to evolve with the election of Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina in 1996. Committed to strengthening local government, her administration established a Local Government Commission in 1997. This commission's report, published the same year, proposed a significant restructuring: a four-tier system with Gram/Palli (Village) Parishads at the village level, Union Parishads, Thana/Upazila Parishads at the sub-district level, and Zila/District Parishads at the district level. This proposal laid the groundwork for the future of local government in Bangladesh.

12. Khaleda Zia Regime (2001-2006)

The trend of reform continued under Khaleda Zia's leadership after 2001. Her administration introduced changes to local government structures, including renaming

Gram Parishads (village councils) to Gram Sarkers (village governments) through a bill passed in 2003. This shift in terminology reflected a potential focus on empowering local governance at the village level.

13. Caretaker Regime (2007-2008)

The non-partisan caretaker government ushered a significant change for Bangladesh's local government. They abolished the Gram Sarker system, effectively reversing the previous administration's reforms. The Upazila Parishad system, previously dismantled, was revived with some modifications through an amended Upazila Parishad Act of 1988. Perhaps their most impactful initiative was the establishment of a Local Government Commission, a critical step towards strengthening local governance institutions in the country.

14. Sheikh Hasina Regime (2009- 2023)

Prime Minister Sheikh Hasina's return to power in 2009 marked a renewed focus on local governance. Her administration enacted a series of legislative reforms, including the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009, and the Local Government (Municipal) Act, 2009. These acts aimed to empower citizens and improve service delivery at the local level, with the inclusion of a "Citizens Charter" provision. Furthermore, her government oversaw a significant period of democratic participation by holding over 6,000 local body elections across various tiers of local government^[20]. Sheikh Hasina's 2009 return to power wasn't just about legislation. Her administration also addressed leadership structures within Upazila Parishads. Parliament amended the Upazila Parishad Act to include both male and female Vice Chairperson positions. Additionally, the Upazila Nirbahi Officer was designated as the chief executive officer, bringing a level of administrative expertise. Perhaps the most dramatic shift came in 2016 with the introduction of partisan elections for Upazila Parishad Chairpersons. This move away from non-partisan elections for this key leadership role marked a significant change in the landscape of local governance in Bangladesh.

15. The Present State of ULG Structure in Bangladesh

Bangladesh's local government system is a two-tiered structure with distinct rural and urban administrations. Rural areas are governed by a three-tier system: Union Parishads at the village level, Upazila Parishads at the sub-district level, and Zilla Parishads at the district level. Urban Local Government (ULG), on the other hand, is a two-tier system. Larger cities are administered by City Corporations, while smaller urban areas are governed by Paurashavas. The Local Government (Municipality) Act of 2009 outlines the structure of Paurashavas, including a Mayor, nine elected councilors from each ward, and three reserved seats for female councilors. Furthermore, the act categorizes Paurashavas into A, B, and C based on their resource mobilization capacity.

Statutory and Legal basis of ULG in Bangladesh

Mirroring a global trend, Bangladesh's 1972 constitution, the country's highest law, enshrines the importance of local government. The constitution outlines provisions for establishing local governing bodies, aiming to empower local communities and actively engage them in their own development. According to article 11 of the constitution, *"the republic shall be a democracy in which fundamental*

humans' rights and freedoms and respects for dignity and worth of the human persons shall be guaranteed, and in which effective participation by the people through their elected representatives in administration at all level shall be ensured." The Bangladesh Constitution, adopted in 1972, recognizes the crucial role of local government. Article 11 underscores the importance of citizen participation in local affairs. Further strengthening this principle, Article 59 mandates the establishment of elected local governments in every administrative unit. Finally, Article 60 empowers these local bodies by granting them the authority to levy local taxes, prepare budgets, and manage their own funds. These constitutional provisions provide a strong foundation for a participatory and empowered local government system in Bangladesh [21].

Citizen's Charter in Bangladesh

The success of Citizen's Charters (CC) in the UK during the 1990s, particularly in improving public service delivery, garnered significant international attention, including in Bangladesh. This initiative's core aim within Urban Local Governments (ULG) was to foster accountability, transparency, and a citizen-centric approach among local service providers.

The Public Administration Reform Commission (PARC), 1997

The concept of New Public Management (NPM) gained momentum in the 1980s, attracting many governments, including those in developing countries. This sparked a wave of emulation, with several nations, Bangladesh included, seeking to replicate the advanced practices of developed economies to expedite their administrative reforms. In line with this trend, Bangladesh established a Public Administration Reform Commission in 1997. This commission was one of 17 formed since the country's independence, all aiming to drive positive and effective changes in administration to ultimately improve public service delivery.

The Initiative of Last Caretaker Government (2007-2008)

The concept of Citizen's Charters (CC) for improved service delivery wasn't lost on Bangladesh. In 2007, the caretaker government, seeking to revive hope for its implementation, issued an official order in May. This directive instructed the preparation of CCs, particularly within public sectors responsible for delivering essential services to citizens. This move echoed the UK model, highlighting Bangladesh's continued interest in adopting successful practices from abroad [22]. The CC method may be termed as the creation of coercive and mimetic forms of policy transfer [23]. In June 2007, a resolution was made to send a government document to all ministries to bring "pace in administrative activities" and along with other order was given to introduce CC [24]. Following the 2007 government order, a wave of Citizen's Charter (CC) implementation began. CC committees were formed across ministries and departments to develop and implement these charters. Recognizing the importance of local participation, the Ministry of Public Administration (formerly Ministry of Establishment) further directed all Divisional and Deputy Commissioners to establish CCs at the local level. This multi-pronged approach aimed to bring the benefits of CCs to both national

and local service delivery in Bangladesh [25]. Citizen's Charters (CC) were finally rolled out across all Local Government Institutions (LGIs) in Bangladesh by 2008. This initiative, mirroring the successful UK model, aimed to empower citizens and ensure their satisfaction with public service delivery. The charters were built on six core principles issued by the Bangladeshi secretariat

1. Measurable standards for service delivery
2. Transparency through disclosure of service provider details, costs, and timeframes
3. Courtesy in service interactions
4. A defined complaint mechanism
5. Options for alternative services
6. Value for money in service provision

Since then, various government agencies have formulated CCs and disseminated them to their local branches, ensuring these principles guide service delivery across the country. To promote the newly introduced Citizen's Charters (CCs) in 2008, the Ministry of Public Administration (formerly Ministry of Establishment) partnered with UNDP on the Civil Service Change Management Program (CSCMP). This project undertook a nationwide public awareness campaign. Through meetings and workshops, the CSCMP engaged various stakeholders, including government officials at the local level, civil society organizations, NGOs, and citizens themselves. The discussions focused on the initial rollout of CCs and explored strategies for ensuring their continued effectiveness at the local level [26]. The Bangladeshi government and civil service displayed significant enthusiasm for implementing Citizen's Charters (CCs). This initiative reflected their commitment to greater accountability, transparency, responsiveness, and a citizen-centered approach within the civil service [27]. Despite being introduced through a top-down approach, Citizen's Charters (CCs) have become a crucial framework for local government administration and service delivery in Bangladesh. This initiative highlights the government's commitment to improving these areas, even if the initial implementation lacked broad participation [28].

Local Government (Municipality) Act, 2009

Building on the momentum of Citizen's Charters (CCs) introduced in 2008, Bangladesh's Parliament solidified their role in local governance with the Local Government (Municipality) Act of 2009. This act formally incorporated CCs (outlined in article 53) as a service delivery tool for Paurashavas, the country's municipal entities [29]. Each municipality formed under this act shall publish details of different services, conditions to provide service and to provide service in prescribed time which shall be named as "Citizen Charter".

Conclusion

The discussion traced the evolution of Urban Local Government (ULG) in Bangladesh, particularly Paurashavas, from their ancient roots to their contemporary form. It explored how various political regimes and legislative reforms shaped these municipal bodies. Despite ongoing efforts to strengthen local governance, challenges like bureaucratic control, insufficient representation, and implementation hurdles persist. The introduction of Citizen's Charters marks a significant step towards improved service delivery and citizen participation.

However, their effectiveness hinges on overcoming these longstanding obstacles.

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