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The Concept of Power in the Context of Development and Communication

By

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What Needs to be Done?

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1. If development can be defined as the process of people's empowerment, it is imperative to throw some light on concept, bases and distribution of power. This paper is based on the hypothesis that the pattern of power distribution is correlated with pattern as well as impact of communication. In this paper an attempt has been made to work out the details of this correlation between development and communications. This exercise shows that present pattern of power distribution among the different strata of people has an in-built anti-people bias. Fulfilment of expectations out of investment in communication is pre-conditioned by an alternate distribution of power controlled by the people. But how? An answer calls for an analysis of power viz-a-viz communication.

2. It is logical to start with the definition of power. Power is often defined as the ability to command public and private resources in terms of men and materials. The degree of command over men and materials is the index of power. At different degree of power different level of command is generated. Control over resource is directly derived from its ownership. Resource ownership pattern dictates the pattern of men to men relations. Command over resource (both human and material) generates scope for acquiring additional resources. Thus resource and power has a strong positive correlation. One is convertible into other. Similar conversion of ideology into power also takes place.

3. Bases of Power:

Land is still the chief resource in an agrarian economy. Command over land is decided by its ownership pattern. He who owns more land possesses more power. Consequently he is in a position to command over greater number of people. And
command over other men widens the scope to accumulate additional resource. Economic power widens his scope to enhanced social status which is ultimately investible to extend resource base.

In course of time, as a result of demographic dynamics. As land appears scarce there is a growing need to acquire alternate resource. Education appears as a significant alternate resource. Those who have land or alternate income are in a better position to invest in education.

Education is convertible in to income and job in the service sector. Even an un-employed person with education is in a position to enjoy social control. People with literacy and education are in a position, through office jobs to control and exploit others especially the illiterates. Control over office files generates scopes for unacknowledged sources of income. An educated man can influence and mobilize others and can provide leadership.

Land, education, office jobs, money etc. can easily be used for establishing linkages that enhance power.

Political affiliation and control over social institutions etc. are no less important as bases of power.

4. Power and Rural Institutions:

During a longitudinal rural (1977-82) Survey* in Bangladesh this author could delineate the following quasi-political rural institutions of which have power manifestations.

* Rural studies, Project, Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies.
These are:

- Factions
- Kinship
- Samaj (Village Society)
- Salish (Village Court)
- Neighbourhood
- Co-operatives
- Mosque/Temperes
- Union Parishad etc.

Due to time and space constraint, it is not possible here to discuss all these institutions in detail. Let us discuss only factions. Implications drawn thereof can also be applied to other institutions which have some political connotations.

5. A factional cleavage is the institutional expression of exercise of power of men over men within rural milieu. Nicholas defined village factions as conflict groups organised for political purpose. A village faction is the largest unit of associated individuals competing for controlling or owning resources either human or material whether public or private. A faction do not have other consistent structural attributes except that it is recruited by a common leader or his immediate lieutenants. At the core of each faction is the faction leader who recruits and organizes his followers on the basis of multiple patron-client relationship making pragmatic use of kinship, economic and neighbourhood ties. A factional cleavage is structurally vertical that cuts across horizontal class lines.
6. Faction Formation:

In this section an attempt will be made to show how a faction grows. The following diagram has been used to locate the social position of different classes people of a village community.

At the bottom there are landless agricultural labourers. Next to landless category are the small farmers, middle farmers and rich farmers in the hierarchical positions in the ladder of socio-economic stratification. Quantitatively the landless are 30-40% out of total population. They have to depend on the sale of physical labour for their livelihood. Naturally they have to depend on the rich farmers for selling their physical labour. Moreover the region is surplus in labour supply. Exploiting the differential social footing the employer (the rich farmer) give them lower wage-rate. They have to surrender to the will be the employer consciously or unconsciously as they do not have hardly any other alternative for their livelihood. Socially these rich farmers play the role of village guardian. Next to the landless in the hierarchical status are the small farmers. Despite their labour from down to dust standard of living is far below 'poverty level'. During distress they have to depend on the rich farmer. The rich farmer takes this chance to mortgaged in land. Luckily the poor farmer become share-croppers on their own land. Besides these economic factors they are also dependent on the surplus farmers for social reasons as the surplus farmers are the matabbars of the Samaj. In order to enhance the power of the matabbar they command over larger section of village people. Success or failure to
occupy land, U.P. chairmanship etc. depend on the extent of command over other people in the village society. Hence recruitment of the people belonging to different socio-economic strata is an unavoidable strategy of factional cleavage. Now a question emanates how this recruitment is done? Suppose, there are two matabbars, namely Mr. X and Mr. Y. Exploiting all the above mentioned dependency relations Mr. X recruits from the landless, marginal farmers and middle farmers. When all these people come under Mr. X they form a faction which is vertical in structure. Now Mr. Y is the rival of Mr. X. He also needs another loyal group to compete with Mr. X. Following similar strategy he also recruits people from different classes. Now the factional followers of Mr. Y fight with the followers of Mr. X. Consequently a landless wage-labourer is fighting with another landless wage-labourer in the interest of his faction chief - though both of them belong to one class i.e. landless class. Similar is the case with marginal farmers, sharecroppers and middle farmers. These horizontal classes are vertically tied up under the existing framework of the society.
7. The situation arising out of the operation of the rural power structure has been rightly by Robert Chambers as deprivation trap which has been shown below:

The Deprivation Trap.
8. How the Power - Structure Reacts when the Alternate Empowerment is in Process?

Empowerment at the grass roots is itself threat to the existing power structure. They hardly take this easily. Despite hostile attitude there are spaces to work. How ? What are these ?

There are times when they will opt for violence. There are times when they will offer compromise. These are:

- Virtually they are affected in various ways. Firstly, easy availability of unlimited supply of labour, at a wage-rate offered by the, is affected.
- When they are organized, wage-barganing is initiated. It leads to generation of tension between the two. Similar things happen regarding sharecropping.

The rich can no more illegally enjoy the government land (Khas land). As per law of the land, the poor claim those. A village level landless group of Gono Gobeshona O Unnayan Foundation (Mass Research and Development Foundation) received government permission to occupy such a piece of government land, conflict cropped up. The police were bribed and 17 landless group members were arrested on false plea. The rich were able to mobilize an influential political leader to support the rich.

Hoarding activities that lead to super profit of the rich are shrunk when the poor use their savings to protect their products from distress sale. Moneylending activities of the rich were severely affected when Banchte Shekha, another women organization, operated loan program. In retaliation the power structure burnt down their handicraft training centre. Conflict
is likely to get more acute when the poor are planning to put their own
candidate in future local election. Examples can be multiplied. But the trend and
of implications are already clear.

8. Alternate Communication:

Isolation means frustration. Communication means hope. Horizontal communica-
tion is likely to do miracle. Success in one village may spark successive
successes in among other village. But how to communicate successes? What media
should be adopted? Strategic decision here needs to be taken.

If development means development of the majority - development communication
has to be unquestionably addressing the majority population catering to their
need in pragmatic way. It has professional connotation. It claims constant
dialogical process with those for those for whom these are meant. Choice of
communication media or a package of media is not a matter to be decided here
rather should be situation specific. Need identification is of immense impor-
tance. Effective communication of development messages to the target benefici-
ciaries should rather be an exploratory exercise.

A lot of features on agriculture, vegetables, fishery, poultry, livestock
afforestation, environment, education etc are being published in different
newspapers. Field workers who ultimately, as frontliners, could carry the
messages to the target beneficiaries were found hardly in touch with all
these. Paper cuttings and subsequent conversion of these into usable form
could be useful.
Recently Television Bangladesh has introduced an excellent program on agriculture (Soil & People) and recently discontinued program legal aid (Law and Court). Results have been found quite encouraging in terms of linking these with grass roots action programs including those of NGOs. NGOs like BRAC, WIF etc. have rightly decided to use TV to widely disseminate health education. Some of the dramas displayed by BTV were found replete with analysis on power-structure. Major constraints that Radio & Television are suffering from have been policy failure to strengthen the grass roots development through Radio and TV programs.

World View International Foundation (WIF) in Bangladesh has shown how effectively VIDEO can be used as a media of development communication. Grameen Bank is using WIF expertise in recording success stories in VIDEO and showing it to other groups in other places to overcome their problems.

At upazila (sub-district) level there are professionals on health, agriculture, fishery, poultry, livestock, etc. These professionals have enough technical information which the villagers need. Unfortunately there are communication gaps. As a result these information remain idle and unused. GO – NGO* cooperation may be a basis to manage this gap.

These are all about external informations to be communicated to the target beneficiaries at the village level. Gono Gobeshona O Unnayan Foundation (Mass Research and Development Foundation) is trying a method where the target beneficiaries are the producer as well as the consumer of information right at the village level.

* GO – stands for government organization while NGO stands for non-government organization.
Concluding Remarks:

9. Group Formation: The Empowerment process:

Deprivation trap as presented earlier shows that the poor are isolated. This isolation is from person to person, person to resource and person to information. The poor are the majority. They need to discover the strength of numbers in contrast to resource and power of the minority rich. Exploring the potential of this strength has to be the entry point of self-reliant and sustainable development process through mobilization of human resources. In the awakening process of this dormant power information have a critical role to play. Since they lack material resource the poor more critically need information and education resource to generate employment and income. As an alternative to in-built harmful linkages with the present power structure alternative linkages with those (including the NGOs) who are interested in their empowerment process, should be established.

10. Alternate Information Flow:

Information has to be seen very much as part of alternate resource package for the resourceless majority. The problems with the present system of communication are not only its contents but also its target audience. Virtually there is no substitute to alternate communication for alternate power structure. Who actually benefits out of the existing communication network should be critically seen.
References:

1. Shapan Adnan and Village study Group, Dhaka Social Structure And Resource Allocation In a Chittagong Village.

2. Rural Studies Project (RSP) of Bangladesh Institute of Development Studies (BIDS).


4. ibid


6. Robert Chambers Rural Development : Putting the last First.


ANNEXURE

A Case study of Factionalism

Nazir Khan is a surplus farmer. He owns about 40 acres of land. He was chairman of union parishad for a number of terms. He is one of the powerful matbaras in the village. Jute Extension Assistant (JEA) resides in his house. In cases of occupying land, contesting for the post of U.P. Chairmanship, exerting influence in the Shalish procedure etc. Momin Mollah competes with him. For all these purposes he needs a number of loyal people. Number of followers is the index of his power. He follows some strategy while recruiting followers. A lot of people he needs to comply in agriculture work. Some landless agricultural labourers often work in his agricultural field as wage-labourers. He has also hired some domestic servants on monthly or yearly basis. It is not possible to cultivate all the lands by wage labourers and domestic servants. So he share-crops out the remaining land. As the demand for agricultural land is higher than supply intensive competition is found among the share-cropper. Nazir Khan share-cropps out only to those who are most loyal to him. Only those are regarded as loyal who come as lathiyal during danga, who cast votes in his favour, who supports Nazir Khan during Shalish procedure. Moreover Nazir Khan has close link with local administration especially the Policy Department.

To derive any benefit and to get rid of police harrassment advocacy of Nazir Khan is much counted. Moreover Nazir Khan is the Secretary of Union Multi-purpose Co-operative Society. He has some criterion of his own regarding who will be getting loans. Hardly any people were found who got loan remaining outside the faction. Consequently landless labourers, sharecroppers, small farmers, middle

* Source : Field work by the author in Maninkgonj, Bangladesh during 1979-82, RSP, BIDS.

** Fictitious names have been used.
farmers are assembled together to form the faction of Nazir Khun. During occupying land or contest of Union Parishad election they are the main stay for Nazir Khan. It is really difficult to live in the village without shelter of any powerful man of the village. It is faction chief who gives this social insurance. Their displeasure involved greater risk that the poor peasants can not bear. Once a young student fell in the grudge of Nazir Khan that led to his arrest by police. He suffered in jail for long five years and now became mentally and physically crippled.

This Nazir Khan raped a beautiful housewife of a neighbouring day-labourer in the absence of her husband. One of his nephews had extra-martial sex relations with a poor girl. Consequently the poor girl conceived. Momin Mollah along with others gave pressure to get them married. It was Nazir Khan who did not allow his relatives to get married to a girl of a poorer family.

I’ll now introduce the rival of Nazir Khan, a man of desperado character. Momin Mollah is a very shrewed village politician who owns about 20 acres of land brick-manufacturing business. His eldest son is a successful contractor. Momin Molla has two tobacco drying machines supplied by the Sub-division Agent of the Virginia Tobacco Company. He has also a big country boat. All these generated enough scope to employ a lot of people. Momin Molla has been very much strategic in all his steps. He established meritorial relations with Hafiz Khan who owns 30 acres of land and biggest hoarder of crops. Momin Molla has also been maintaining good relations with the lineage that has deeper footing in the urban areas doing prestigious jobs. One of the lineage members is now the MCA (Member of Constituent Assembly) of the local constituency. All these strategies in acquiring social status and forming factional cleavage helped him to gain more and more power.
Momin Molla's ever increasing power was first reflected in the union parishad election and land-dispute with Nazir Khan. Molla's strategy has been during the last union parishad election was to defeat Nazir Khan. Momin Molla did not take the risk of contesting himself. All were surprised when he supported and began propaganda in favour of Dr. Zaman. Consequently once undisputed Nazir Khan was defeated and Dr. Zaman came out victorious. The climax of clash between the two cleavages took place in the year 1969 centering 14 bighas of land belonging to some local hindus who migrated to India. Nazir Khan with a view to occupy the land with the followers built a house. The 'lathyals' of Nazir Khan smashed the house to the ground. A direct fight became imminent. Understanding the gravity of the situation the local Pir Shaheb (spiritual leader) interrupted and asked both the parties to refrain from bloody fight. So far we talked about the role of the faction chiefs. This is also germane to focus on the sub-faction chiefs who are virtually recruiting agents of the faction chiefs. Rafez Khan a sub-faction leader who is also a union parishad member too Tk.10,000/- from a rural Development Agency through forgery of co-operative members. Another sub-faction leader Abdul Ali who is contractor by profession allied with Momin Molla took Tk.18,000/- from local IRDP office and invested the fund in his contractor business and I found no trace of IRDP co-operative in the village but formal record of which is maintained by the thana IRDP officials. This man is also been seen to be staunch supporter of Local MCA. Another recruiting agent of Momin Molla who is school teacher by profession and a middle farmer took agricultural credit (Tk.1700/-) from the local bank and used the money for mortgaging in land from the marginal farmers virtually reducing them to landless category. If these are the facts naturally question arises what is
the use of paper co-operative which is totally devoid of mass participation
and what is the use of extending agricultural credit? These are few instances
of misuse of resource, resource transfer and internal exploitation under
the shelter of factional cleavage.