

SOCIAL JUSTICE AND BANGABANDHU'S VILLAGE DEVELOPMENT THOUGHTS: A RETROSPECTIVE INQUIRY AND ANALYSIS

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Abstract

After the independence of Bangladesh, the Planning Commission, headed by Bangabandhu, allocated highest percentage of the total resources for the village-centric sectors. Thus, question arises why Bangabandhu brought such changes in attitude while in power, what were the contexts of Bangabandhu's concept of village development, what was his purpose and, how did he plan to execute his notion of development. These questions still remain mostly unanswered. This article aims to explore the context of Bangabandhu's thoughts on village development. On the basis of John Rawls' social justice theory, it also aims to find out how he evaluated the actions and inactions of Pakistan central government regarding these issues, and examine his thoughts on village development. This paper presents an analytical narrative about Bangabandhu's ideas about village development. To do so, this research utilizes both primary and secondary sources. Government documents, autobiographies, memoirs, newspapers, transcripts of Bangabandhu's speeches, research books and articles are the basis of this paper. This research is qualitative in nature. Following historical methods, it concludes with the finding that the village development thoughts of Bangabandhu have their origin in Bangabandhu's personal experience and world outlook. Development of village became his first priority. 'Prosperous villages for a prosperous nation' was the key principle to his village development philosophy and the village cooperative systems was the core component to achieve his goal.

Keywords: *Social Justice, Bangabandhu, Village Development, Farmer, Manifesto, Village Cooperative*

Introduction

“...We are now turning towards the villages... The income of Bangladesh will no longer be city-centric but village-centric so that farmers can prosper

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more.” (Alam, 2020^b: 48-50) In a speech delivered at Mymensingh Agricultural University on February 13, 1973, aforementioned remarks of Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman (Henceforth only Bangabandhu) conveyed a clear message about his government’s development priority. *The First Five Year Plan (1973-78)* of the Bangabandhu government stated in its preamble that “considering the extensive importance of the agricultural sector, utmost attention has been given to this sector in this plan.” This claim was reflected in the allocation of the development budget in the plan. The Planning Commission allocated the highest 24 percent of the total resources for the ‘Agriculture and Water Resources’ sector. The rural population’s stake in prosperity was emphasized. Bangabandhu was fully aware of the relationship between land, farmers, and rural life. Hence, increase in production, fair distribution, creating employment, and overall rural development were the four main objectives that Bangabandhu incorporated into his *First Five Year Plan* with special emphasis on cooperative-dependent village projects. (Sarker, 2014) Although this project did not see the light of day, Bangabandhu’s vision for village development resurfaced in 1975 in his ‘Second Revolution’ implementation projects. Through mandatory and multi-faceted village cooperative methods, Bangabandhu aimed to be successful in the economic arena as well as reinvigorate the once ‘lively’ village life. (Rashid, 2022) In contrast, during British and Pakistani rule, the ruling elite’s attitude was one kind of complete indifference to village lives and prospects.

Thus, questions arise why did Bangabandhu bring such change in his attitude while in power; what were the contexts of Bangabandhu’s concept of village development; what was the purpose of these concepts; how did he plan to execute his notion of development? etc. These questions still remain largely unanswered. This article aims to explore the context of Bangabandhu’s thoughts on village development, know how he evaluated the actions and inactions of the Pakistan central government regarding the issues, and examine the thoughts and steps taken by the Bangabandhu government on village development. The present research adopts two main approaches to such inquiry and analysis. It presents an analytical narrative on Bangabandhu’s ideas about village development. To do so, this research work utilizes both primary and secondary sources. Government documents, autobiographies, memoirs, newspapers, transcripts of Bangabandhu’s speeches, research books and articles are the basis of this paper. This research is qualitative in nature. Following historical methods,

it concludes with the finding that the village development thoughts of Bangabandhu have their origin in Bangabandhu's personal experience and world outlook. Development of village became his first priority. 'Prosperous villages for a prosperous nation' was the key principle to his village development philosophy and the village cooperative systems was the core component to achieve his goal.

The presentation of this article is divided into four major sections. Apart from research methodology, the first section includes the theoretical framework; the second section covers the context of Bangabandhu's thoughts on village development. The third section presents his ideas and thoughts on village development which we get to know from him as one of the opposition leaders of the then Pakistan. The fourth section includes his thoughts on village development as a Bangladeshi statesman.

Research Methodology

The article is solely qualitative in nature and adheres to the historical methods. Primarily, it adopts an analytical and descriptive approach. An attempt has been made to understand the essence of Bangabandhu's village development vision through his speeches, reports, writings, and the internal communications within his party. To this end, this paper relies on Bangabandhu's autobiography and memoirs, secret documents, Awami League council reports, transcripts of his speeches, and articles published in daily newspapers. Additionally, some valuable books written about Bangabandhu or village/rural life in Bangladesh have been used as secondary sources in writing the article. In this research work, Bangabandhu's concept of rural development includes the ideas or attitudes he expressed directly through the use of the word 'village' or 'rural' in his writings and speeches, the thoughts he conveyed regarding the primary human capital in rural economic infrastructure- farmers/agriculturists, the sentiments he expressed regarding rural laborer development, and those related aspects. His statements or decisions in plans concerning the creation of employment and land or landless population, where the terms 'village' or 'rural' areas are mentioned, are also included within the scope of this concept. In case of using quotations of Bangabandhu, the authorized translation of his memoirs has been used. In other cases, the researcher has translated the quotations found in Bengali in different sources.

Theoretical Framework

A state is a society constituted voluntarily for mutual cooperation and protection. Arguably the state, being the sole authority of a society, bears the responsibility to ensure justice for its human beings i.e. citizens as asserted by so many scholars, Ibne Sina being one of them. (Ismail & Cahyo, 2018) Humans are basically social and political creatures. Thus, the rights and freedoms of individuals cannot be so clearly separated from the state. Thus, there is an attempt to allot a more active role for the state, integrating and promoting the lives of individuals. (Vincent, 1987) Thus, observing its role religiously, a state can ensure social justice for the individuals.

Justice is the inherent nature of human living, and the basis for our social as well as practical life. Barker defines social justice as “an ideal condition in which all members of a society have the same basic rights, protection, opportunities, obligations, and social benefits”. (Barker, 1995: 54) Justice is the first virtue of social intuitions which lead, guide, translate, and transform the actions and ideas of living beings in a society. We can hardly imagine a well-ordered society whose basic concept is not justice. Indeed, justice binds all operational elements, i.e. human beings and institutions of society.

Social justice is the notion that everyone in a society deserves equal rights and equitable opportunities in the pervasive arena of economy, politics and society. Oxford Reference defines social justice as “The objective of creating a fair and equal society in which each individual matters, their rights are recognized and protected, and decisions are made in ways that are fair and honest.” (<https://www.oxfordreference.com/display/10.1093/oi/authority.20110803100515279>)

Social Justice refers to the fair treatment and equitable position of individuals within a society and state. The term refers “to social, political, and economic institutions, laws, or policies that collectively afford such fairness and equity, inclusion, self-determination, or other goals for currently or historically oppressed, exploited, or marginalized populations.” (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/social-justice>)

Now questions arise as that who is responsible for implementing social justice and how social justice can be achieved? Hobbs, Locke, Rousseau and few other philosophers and political scientists have articulated their ideas on those questions. Most recently, John Rawls is one of those contributing extensively on this issue. non-elite

John Rawls is an American political scientist and philosopher widely considered to be the foremost contributor through his most famous work, *A Theory of Justice* first published in 1971, and its revised edition was published in 1999 by Harvard University Press. Rawls formulated social justice on the basis of the social contract approach. This approach states that the existence of a society is the result of the unanimous decision between a society and its peoples to agree for a social contract. (Rawls, 1971) Rawls states that "Justice is the first virtue of social institution;" (Rawls, 1971: 3) This means that a good society is a society structured on the principles of justice. He identifies the basic structure of society as the main subject of justice. The basic structure of society itself consists of eminent social institutions, politics, law and economics. In other words, it comprises a large institution that manages the social cooperation system. Every basic structure has an individual function, which is to distribute the social burden and benefits to every individual. Everyone involved in this social cooperation must be in a state of freedom and be rational and equal.

In Chapter II of his book titled "The Principle of Justice" he brings forth two principles of justice. These are the principle of fair equality and opportunity and the difference principle. The principle of fair equality and opportunity assumes that every individual can obtain equal opportunities; thus, the maximum and equal liberty is then possible. (Rawls, 1971: 171-180) Meanwhile, the difference principle implores that if there is a social and economic difference within a society, then these must be regulated in a way that will give the greatest advantage towards members of society that are less fortunate; therefore, the society (of less fortunate) realizes social justice. (Rawls, 1971: 65)

Next, in Chapter III of *A Theory of Justice*, Rawls suggests ways of achieving justice through "The Original Position" theory. Rawls refers that the original position is a hypothetical situation in which personal things are behind a veil of ignorance. In short, Rawls would like to convey that if someone wants to act fair, then that person must wear the veil of ignorance. Therefore, a person wearing this veil will go through the process of the concealment of self, in which that person has to forget about his or her economic, social and physical status until achieving a social justice position (Rawls, 1971: 118).

However, it's very interesting to note that Rawls didn't clarify how the specific authority, i.e., State, would assume its role to implement 'Justice

as Fairness', at least in his book of 1971. He seems to have "no conception of the generation, deployment, limitations, on problems of political power. In a word, he has no theory of the state." (Wolff, 1977: 20) But there is a 'State', in disguise in Rawls' *A Theory of Justice*. He wrote that "the civil association regulates the general conditions so that individuals can pursue their individual interests. The officials are conceived of as virtually equivalent to umpires. Thus, the individuals are viewed as rational agents with interests and right claims. The state must be understood as the association consisting of equal citizens". (Rawls, 1971: 212)

The general approach of some scholars is to regard the state is an 'organisation of political power'. (Sarangi, 1991: 196; Perdomo and Others, 2023: 4970) However, it would be naive if one simply analyses political power as an isolated phenomenon. Political power structure is neatly blended with economic and social power structures. Hence, any discussion on the state has to take into account this composite power structure which Rawls regards as the basic structure of society. The primary subject of justice, according to Rawls, is this basic structure of society, i.e., "the way in which the major social institutions distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine the division of advantages from social co-operation" (Rawls, 1971: 7).

Bangabandhu advocated the establishment of a discrimination free society. He wanted social justice to prevail and believed that the state¹ should take the lead role to ensure it. As Bangabandhu treated Pakistan as a colonial state as far as the East Bengal is concerned, he frequently raised the questions of the State's discriminatory policies toward the rural people of East Bengal. When he assumed power in independent Bangladesh, he always spoke about the eradication of discrimination from his 'sonar bangla'. In this context, Rawls' theory of social justice is relevant. In this article, an attempt has been made to examine in the context of the above theory, how Bangabandhu evaluated the role of the Pakistan state in ensuring social justice for the village people of East Bengal and how far his thoughts on village development reflect social justice.

Context of Bangabandhu's Village Development Thoughts

Bangabandhu considered his family to be a rural 'middle-class' family. Its main source of income was 'some land that they (the Sheikhs) owned in around their homes'. (Rahman, 2023: 2, 5) Though his father was a low-paid government servant, agriculture was the primary source

of income for this family. Its when Bangabandhu's father left his job in 1942, agriculture became the main source of income for his family. Born into a farming family, Bangabandhu was well aware of the struggles of the agrarian class, the class which constituted the main economic backbone of rural life. He famously said, "I know it very well being closely tied with the peasant family what the exploitations are!" (Bangabandhu's Quotes on Agriculture, 2020) This single sentence elucidates two clear points: one, Bangabandhu believed that agriculture and farmers, which formed the mainstay of rural economy, were deeply exploited; two, there were no effective initiatives from the government at that time to eradicate the elements contributing to such exploitation, particularly landlord-tenant relationships, rural usury systems, relevant and supportive laws, etc.

Bangabandhu observed the relatively less importance given to villages and rural life in the eyes of administrators during the famine of 1943, often viewed as a government created famine. Its prime victims were the poor rural population. During this calamity, Bangabandhu observed as an eyewitness:

By this time the famine had spread. Hundreds of thousands of people were swarming to the cities in search of foods. But there was no food or clothing left for them. The British had confiscated all naval vessels for the war effort. They had stockpiled rice and wheat to feed their soldiers... Not a day went by without people dying on the city streets. (Rahman, 2023: 17)

Being part of the relief work carried out by his party, Bangabandhu came to his own village during this time. In his *The Unfinished Memoirs*, he wrote down his experiences of that time, stating, "I returned to my home town to find the situation there was appalling. Most people had turned into nothing but skin and bones from the lack of food" (Rahman, 2023: 19) It is noteworthy that the land of Bangabandhu's birthplace and the surrounding districts was fertile, and the people "were usually able to make ends meet" (Rahman, 2023: 19) Therefore, there was no scope of food shortage occurring in that area. At that time, Bangabandhu became convinced of the government's lack of policies and actions. As he writes:

But the English had given priority to the war effort and for them the people of Bengal came second. As far as they were concerned, precedence would have to be given to the movement of arms. Trains would therefore first allot space to arms and ammunitions. Only the leftover space could be used

for moving foodgrain. The English were locked in battle and the Bengalis would have to die of hunger as a consequence (Rahman, 2023: 17)

Regarding the consequences of the famine, Bangabandhu wrote, “While the English would be fighting a war in a distant land 4 million men and women in our country would die like dogs or foxes because of hunger” (Rahman, 2021: 22) In reality, the famine of 1943 had a tremendous impact on Bangabandhu’s thoughts. It can be argued that the bitter experience of his early youth, in particular, the damage caused to rural life and relationships by the famine, and the lack of any minimum sincere effort by the ruling class to combat it then, became one of the paths leading to the construction of Bangabandhu’s thoughts on rural Bengal life.

In 1952, Bangabandhu went to China for the first time. Since the completion of the socialist revolution in 1949, the revolutionary government had been making efforts to build a new China. During his visit there, Bangabandhu visited several cities and villages outside the designated travel itinerary of the Chinese government, driven by his own interest. It was during this visit that Bangabandhu observed various initiatives of the Chinese government aimed at village development, which included the promotion of cooperative farming methods, the initiation of village panchayat systems, the formation of Mutual Aid Societies in villages, land reforms including distribution of surplus and barren lands, transformation of uncultivated lands into cultivable ones, provision of various opportunities and facilities for agricultural workers, and establishment of rural law and order through joint efforts of administration and the people. (Rahman, 2021: 116-124) The Chinese government’s initiatives regarding rural society were considered by Bangabandhu to be important and to him it contrasted starkly with the lack of similar initiatives by the Pakistani government. At least in the context of former East Pakistan, the aforementioned remarks were largely true. Bangabandhu deeply appreciated these efforts of village revitalization undertaken by the Chinese government during his visit.

In Pakistan, there was no assurance of any legal provisions or constitutional guarantees for village regeneration. In reality, Pakistan adopted her constitution twice during these twenty-four years, in 1956 and 1962, but none of them focused on village life. That of course suggests that rural life held no significance in the eyes of the ruling class of the time. This situation certainly did not escape Bangabandhu’s attention.

Apart from personal experiences, Bangabandhu was familiar with the long-standing exploitation of Bengalis by the British through the 'Permanent Settlement' which had led to systematic exploitation got started in village life. Through it, land ownership was transferred from farmers to landlords resulting in farmers becoming tenants, and the formation of the peasant labor class. As a consequence of this system, however, agricultural surplus began to flow from villages to cities and were ever laundered abroad. Moreover, neither the rural surplus-enjoying class (such as landlords) nor the government made any investment in villages or agriculture.

The East Bengal State Acquisition and Tenancy Act of 1950 brought good news to rural people during the Pakistan era. This law resulted in land ownership reverting to the farmers, with individual land ownership limited to 100 bighas. However, there was a loophole in this law that exempted sugarcane, jute, rubber, tea, fruit gardens, mechanized agricultural fields, or large dairy farms from this ceiling. This meant that large landowners having such farms could retain their land ownership under this law. Furthermore, due to an amendment in this law in 1961, the limit of land ownership was increased from 100 bighas to 375 bighas per individual. Additionally, before the abolition of the Zamindari system in 1950, zamindars mostly sold their land to local wealthy individuals, businessmen, rising farming families, or emerging middle-class families. Consequently, large zamindari estates were transformed into small holdings, increasing the number of landowners and ultimately giving rise to a new land-based middle-class. (Chowdhury, 2003) Following the abolition of the Permanent Settlement, government revenue officers immediately encroached upon the positions of zamindars and talukdars. In reality, government revenue officers in rural society emerged as a new influential class. (Farooque, 1983) Therefore, even after the abolition of the Permanent Settlement or the zamindari system, real farmers did not gain new land ownership, and there was no real alleviation of rural life's hardships.

However, after the Land Tenancy Act 1950 came into force, all land, except government roads, came to be taxable. As a result, no fallow land existed and that is why, there was an additional increase in the cost of livestock rearing for villagers. Furthermore, government kept imposing new taxes such as the Road tax, Education tax, Local tax, Relief tax, Development tax, etc. The tax rate went up every year. Compared to British rule, revenue imposition on villages increased tenfold during the first decade of Pakistan's administration. (Karim, 2021) In addition to the increase in taxation, the government's introduction of the Certificate Case² (to be explained in note)

caused new problems in rural society. During 1965-66, almost eight million of such cases were recorded in East Bengal (Karim, 2021) which ultimately created a 'reign of terror' in rural farming society.

It's very unfortunate that even after the abolition of zamindari system, almost fifty percent of rural families in Pakistan were landless (Islam, 2017; Azad, 1997). At that time, almost twenty percent of the homeowners in rural areas did not own the land on which their houses were built. This figure was increasing at that time. Additionally, in East Pakistan, in the decade of the 1960s, while the population was growing at a rate of 2.9 percent, food production was only increasing at a rate of 0.7 percent (First Five Year Plan, 1973). Thus, from the inception of the Pakistan state, various pressures were increasing on the economic and social life of village people.

The Permanent Settlement had significantly reduced a village's political and administrative roles by introducing the 'Union Council' as the primary unit of governance. (Islam, 2017) Due to the persistence of the British-favored Union Council system in Pakistan's era, even in an independent country, rural people remained neglected. This governmental neglect of village life further intensified under Ayub's regime, leading to a more pronounced sense of 'marginalization' in rural life. (Islam, 2017) Under Ayub's rule, a new exploitative class emerged in the villages, strengthening their unchecked power within the Union Councils (Sobhan, 1968). During Ayub's era, more than 70% of the elected or nominated BD members were from large or medium-sized farmer families who were essentially affiliated with the exploitative class (Rashiduzzaman, 1968). At that time, over 85% of the chairmen of the Union Councils were local land-based elites (Sobhan, 1968). Through both elected and nominated means, this class, having gained powerful positions, obtained advantages, controlling the economic, social, political, and administrative life of the villages.

Bangabandhu, with his roots in village life, had profound first-hand knowledge about the aforementioned multi-faceted problems of village life. His personal experience of seeing the various inadequacies, exploitation, government neglect, and bias towards the villages on the one hand, and concerted efforts for village development he observed in China on the other, we may claim, had consolidated the village development thoughts of Bangabandhu.

Bangabandhu's Thoughts on Village Development: Pakistan Phase

In 1947, when Pakistan gained independence, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman was just seventeen years old. At that time, he was very active in student politics. In 1949, he entered national politics. In Pakistan, Bangabandhu soon emerged as a mature politician. In this phase, he realized that true progress of the country was not possible by keeping the villages and the majority people of agrarian society, deprived. Therefore, he advocated the abolition of the feudal system supporting the demands of the overwhelmingly agrarian society and of the progressive elements of the country. On June 1, 1948, the opposition faction of the then Muslim League, under the chairmanship of Maulana Bhashani, held a public meeting at Eidgah Maidan in Narayanganj. In this meeting, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman argued strongly in favor of the abolition of the feudal system without compensation, and against the imposition of taxes on the poor. He made some powerful points. He said,

“... Our leaders and we too preached it (Abolition of Zemindary system) in villages to the general public but our pledge to that effect has been far from fulfilment. Our peasants are homeless and are going without food and cloth. They die of starvation. There has been no arrangement for their education and medical aid. The Zemindary system alone is responsible for their miseries and privations. ... When the peasants are over burdened with-taxes of various kinds, the govt. is going to give rupees 60 crores as compensation to the Zemindars. This will have a baneful effect on the life of the poor public. (Hasina, 2018, Vol-I: 26)

Abolishing the feudal system without compensation was not only a demand he made, in 1956, during a session of the Pakistan National Assembly in Karachi, Bangabandhu delivered extremely powerful and courageous speeches, through which he expressed his as well as the Awami Leagues position on this issue. In the Assembly session held on January 21, the demand for the abolition of the feudal system without compensation was raised, and in addition, he strongly criticized attempts to exploit the poor and landless farmers in the name of Islam. (Iqbal, 1997) Through his speeches in Pakistan, Bangabandhu clarified his strong opposition to against the feudal-landlord system. In an Assembly session on February 14, he demanded the redistribution of land among the landless farmers and argued confiscating without compensation the land of the zamindars. (Iqbal, 1997)

After the inception of Pakistan, people in the country, especially those in rural areas, expected significant qualitative changes in their lives.

However, instead of such changes, a reverse journey seemed to begin. At that time, Bangabandhu observed government negligence towards villages and rural people in governmental policies. On May 17, 1948, at a conference of the Councilors of the East Pakistan Muslim League held at Narayanganj Public Library, he criticized the government's biased policies towards urban areas, saying:

There is an acute scarcity of clothes in villages. Rural people do not get clothes to purchase whereas people in the towns get sufficient supply of clothes and clothes are being sold in black market. ... but after its achievement they (village people) feel disappointed as there has been no change in their standard of living. On the other hand, taxes are being imposed on them. When we point these out and demand their remedy and also eradication of corruption and injustice, we are damned as traitors, 5th Columnists etc. (Hasina, 2018, Vol-I: 19)

In the educational policy of the newly independent country, Bangabandhu repeatedly criticized the government for not giving equal importance to the education of both urban and rural people, and the rich and the poor. He condemned the discriminatory behavior of the government for its education policies. On January 20, 1953, during a meeting held in the premises of Gaibandha Dakbanglow, Bangabandhu argued that the government was not interested in ensuring mass education. As regards education scheme he said that it was nothing but a bluff to the public. Establishing only public schools, according to him, was just creating divisions between the relations of common people and higher officials. (Hasina, 2019, Vol-3: 40) Bangabandhu criticized the government's discriminatory behavior towards non-government educational institutions and rural-based educational institutions in his speech.

A few years after the establishment of Pakistan, the government started imposing various types of taxes on the people of the country, which continued to increase almost every year. The government's tax policy unfairly burdened the rural agrarian class, which led to considerable pressure on them. Many leaders of pre-partition Bengal, including Bangabandhu, criticized the government's policies. Criticism of the government tax policy began as early as 1948. On January 30, 1953, at a public meeting in Pabna, he criticized the government's tax policy, saying that due to the government's excessive tax collection, betel nut and tobacco producers could not get even the actual price of their production. This economic loss to the producers has made their lives miserable. Even the

sugar cane farmers of Kushtia were not getting the proper price for their products. Due to the government's inappropriate policies regarding jute, farmers were facing gradual decrease in the price of jute. (Hasina, 2019) Indeed, since independence, the price of jute had been decreasing steadily for several years. The sudden decline in the price of jute had plunged the farmers into hardship. Bangabandhu believed that the central government's policy was responsible for this loss to the farming community. Considering the adverse situation, Bangabandhu expressed his resentment against the government through numerous speeches and statements for not taking any measures in favor of the farmers' interests.

From the Second World War onwards, food crises began to be frequently observed in East Bengal. Since 1943, regular occurrence of this crisis became a constant source of anxiety for people. After the independence of Pakistan, her government was not able to take immediate and effective measures to solve food crises. (Kamal, 2016) Consequently, people's lives, particularly, those in rural areas, even more specifically the food scarcity areas, were severely affected by food shortages. Bangabandhu had been critical of the government's role in such food crisis even in 1948. Speaking at a student assembly held at Daulatpur College in Khulna on December 1, 1948, he had said:

Firstly: food crisis and national defense are our primary concerns. ... If people are not given proper food, their minds cannot remain at peace. ... If arrangements for food and clothing are made for the people, they will come forward to defend the country spontaneously. Defense of the country cannot be achieved through military strength alone. (Hasina, 2018, Vol-1: 56;)

In the struggle against food crisis of the period, Bangabandhu led the movement of the Dawals (mobile rice reapers) against the 'Cordon System' imposed on them in Khulna in 1948-49. (Hasina, 2018) His involvement in the Dawal movement is a proof of Bangabandhu's rural and farmer-oriented politics.

After the creation of Pakistan, the anticipated positive changes in the agrarian society of Bengal did not materialize. Neither the central nor the provincial government took any decisive steps to bring about changes in the lives of farmers or made any noteworthy investments in agriculture or land. Consequently, agricultural production did not see any significant increase there. (Karim, 2021) However, the expenses for peasant families increased sharply. Bangabandhu personally acknowledged this dire

situation in agrarian society in the new country. He held the central government of Pakistan responsible for the plight of the farmers. At the Kagmari Conference on August 8, 1956, Bangabandhu observed:

The Bengal that was once green with crops is now transformed into a dry desert. The people here are wandering like dogs and cats in search of a handful of rice... The central ruling clique has been cruelly exploiting East Pakistan through abhorrent conspiracies and has brought the lifeblood of the country, the farmers, to the brink of destruction. (Hasina, 2020, Vol-4: 484-485;)

One of the major obstacles to the prosperity of the farmers' lives in East Bengal was the annual floods. Due to floods, all classes of producers and workers in rural areas suffered severe economic losses. In addition to high interest rates and lack of capital in the countryside, floods further exacerbated the economic situation for small landholding farmers and cottage industry entrepreneurs in flood-prone East Bengal, who had hardly ever accumulated wealth. Apart from these two segments of rural society, other low-income groups faced financial hardships almost every year as they depleted their savings during the flood season, resulting in persistent poverty amongst them. The hope of the aforementioned segments of rural society in the new country was that the government would take necessary measures to alleviate the curse of annual floods. However, neither the central nor the centrally controlled provincial governments took effective measures in this regard. The neglect of this significant portion of rural society by the government never escaped Bangabandhu's attention. Speaking at the Awami League Workers' Convention held in Chowmuhani, Noakhali, on September 28, 1969, Bangabandhu stated:

The flood every year cause extensive damage to the lives and properties of ordinary people, but the government has not taken any effective measures to control them. Due to floods, the economic condition of the farmers' families in the region has deteriorated ever more. Families that were solvent ten years ago are now struggling to survive and live in abject poverty. While industrialists receive various benefits from the government, including loans and facilities, farmers and hardworking people are burdened with taxes and face harassment about loan repayments. (*The Daily Ittefaq*, 29 September 1969,)

On December 2 of that year, during an Iftar party organized by the Rajarbagh Union Awami League in Dhaka, Bangabandhu depicted the

grim picture of the impoverished, flood-affected, drought-stricken, and deprived villages of Bengal, and said, "Without self-governance and flood control, East Bengal will eventually fall victim to famine and death." (*The Daily Ittefaq*, 3 December 1969, translated by the researcher)

Due to government policies and actions, Bangabandhu believed that the villages of Bengal were becoming increasingly impoverished and plagued by adversity. Speaking at a discussion meeting held in Dhaka on December 5, 1969, on the occasion of the sixth death anniversary of Huseyn Shaheed Suhrawardy, he criticized government existing policies saying,

In Pakistan, the resources of the State have been centralized in the hands of 22 families, and rural Bengal has become a graveyard. The villagers, already struggling with disease, malnutrition, and starvation, are getting leaner. For five years, tax holidays have been arranged for industrialists, yet landowners up to 25 bighas have not had their taxes waived, and workers have not received their share from factories. This situation must come to an end. (*The Daily Ittefaq*, 6 December 1969,)

It is noteworthy that Bangabandhu and the Awami League were demanding the waiver of taxes for landowners up to 25 bighas since 1954. On the other hand, they had been demanding fair rates of tax collection from industrialists and utilizing those funds for the welfare of the people. However, from the above statement of Bangabandhu, it is evident that the government was doing just the opposite.

In 1970, focusing on Pakistan's national and regional elections, Bangabandhu repeatedly emphasized the importance of rural issues in his party's campaign. Addressing a gathering at Comilla Town Hall on January 23, 1970, he stated, "Land will be distributed for landless farmers in the villages." (Rahman, 2020: 46) To address the recurring 'curse' of floods that affected people's lives in villages, he referred to the central government on August 5, 1970, in a public meeting at Chouhali in Sirajganj, saying, "The people of Bengal are not willing to tolerate any negligence in controlling floods." Similarly, on August 6 in Meghai of Sirajganj, on August 15 in Keraniganj, Dhaka, on August 20 in Tongi, and on September 2 in Narail, he criticized the government's flood control policies. In the Narail meeting, Bangabandhu commented on government's allocation policies to control the floods, saying, "For flood control, we want the entire budget, not occasional pocket expenses." (Rahman, 2020: 50-52) Bangabandhu's

remarks hinted at the fact that the government, in pursuit of its goals, had never made any effective investment to tackle the problems of the eastern region. Instead, it seemed they had opted to maintain the status quo. To promote industry and create employment opportunities in every village, Bangabandhu emphasized the importance of cooperative arrangements. In a radio and television speech in November 1970, he said, “Small-scale industries should be promoted through cooperatives. These industries should be spread across villages so that various types of industries spread from village to village, creating employment opportunities for rural people.” (Biswas, 2020: 44)

During Pakistan’s nearly two-era-long rule, rural areas of East Bengal experienced various transformations. In Bangabandhu’s experience, these changes in rural life were politically significant. On May 29, 1970, addressing a gathering in Manikganj, he stated, “The history of Pakistan’s last 23 years is a history of sorrow, misery, famine, oppression, persecution, and utter destruction. The country that was once lush green, with fields of crops and celebrations in its villages, has now turned into a graveyard and desert.” (*The Daily Azad*, May 30, 1970) To free the people from Pakistani oppression and to utilize the fertile land for the creation of new life for the people, Bangabandhu emphasized on the necessity of political regeneration among the rural population. At an Awami League Iftar Party meeting in Dhaka’s Razarbag, on December 2, he urged party workers to “work hard day and night, transform every neighborhood, every village into a fortress of people’s rights.” (*The Daily Ittefaq*, December 3, 1969) Bangabandhu’s remarks were warmly received by his party workers. The historic victory of the Awami League in the national and provincial council elections held in Pakistan in 1970 was the outcome of this advice.

Concept on Village Development as Reflected in Party Manifestoes

Analyzing Bangabandhu’s speeches and statements given during the Pakistan era, it becomes evident that his vigilant gaze was always directed towards the transformative aspects of village life. However, this vigilant gaze was accentuated by his diverse knowledge and global perspective. Based on such foundations, he highlighted the roots of rural Bengal’s fundamental problems and the responsibility of local rulers. Alongside identifying the problems and crises in rural life, he presented to the people his personal as well as party-based visions for addressing these issues. As soon as Pakistan became independent, allegations arose that the Muslim

League and government were under the control of 'Khan Sahib', 'Khan Bahadur', etc. The progressive young leaders who supported Suhrawardy-Hashim in the Muslim League played a leading role in forming the Awami Muslim League as an alternative political force. In the initial days after its establishment, the party gained popularity through rallies, protests, hunger strikes, and other ways of pressurizing on the government to resolve the prevalent food crisis in East Bengal. Apart from such tactics, the party also attracted non-elite³ people's attention by announcing various demands and initiatives such as the abolition of the zamindari system without compensation, land distribution among farmers, primary education, fair price assurance for jute, and universal suffrage. It was through this manifesto that the party gained close attention and support from the masses. This manifesto directly highlighted rural issues critically, stating:

The British government, with the help of its loyal servants, established the zamindari system in our country, which led to widespread and comprehensive exploitation. Along with the zamindari system came the usurious mahajans and the excessively greedy profiteering mahajans. Due to the ruthless and extensive exploitation of this plan, the villages of this country are now deprived and impoverished. The condition of the farmers has become perilous. (Kashem, 2021: 29)

To revitalize and remake self-sufficient villages of Bengal, the working vision of Awami League was presented in this same manifesto. The manifesto reads:

... cooperative and collective farming practices would be established. The burden of managing these cooperatives and collective farms should rest on local democratic institutions. Efforts would be made to strengthen these cooperative committees so that they could assist in making the villages prosperous and affluent by curbing usurious lending practices and excessive profiteering businesses. Easy credit arrangements would be established, and the prevalent practice of lending capital with excessive interest rate would be abolished. Efforts would be made to ensure easy access to industrial produce inexpensively in rural areas. (Kashem, 2021: 29-30)

Apart from these aforementioned subjects, the outline of the manifesto also provided a timely framework for addressing all the indispensable components of rural production and distribution chains (such as human resources, cottage industries, irrigation management, advanced seed supply, transportation, infrastructure, etc.). Examining the entire

manifesto, makes it evident that the Awami Muslim League had prioritized rural development as the cornerstone of the country's progress. Therefore, the development philosophy of this manifesto could be summarized thus: "Prosperous villages for a prosperous nation."

Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman, as the founding joint general secretary of the Awami Muslim League, was in agreement with the statements included in the party's manifesto. He expressed his concurrence with this sentiment. During the formulation and finalization of each manifesto published by the party during his tenure as the joint secretary from 1953 onwards, and subsequently as the general secretary from 1955, he was intimately involved in articulating its policies and plans. In particular, the Awami League consistently emphasized rural development policies in the election manifestos it issued during the elections held in Pakistan in 1954 and 1970. Therefore, in all these manifestos and councils held during his tenure first as the general secretary and later as the president of the Awami League, he repeatedly stressed the party's founding policies on rural development. In the 1950s, when the Bengal Tenancy Act, 1950 was enacted, a new complication arose in rural life in the form of the certificate system. According to this law, if land revenue was due, government officials responsible for revenue collection could file a certificate case against the landowner. Owing to pending land revenue, however, farmers in the village often became entangled in certificate cases, that led to various unexpected crises. To protect landowners from this situation, the Awami League proposed the resolution "Demand for the Abolition of the Certificate System for Land Revenue" in the Council Assembly of 1955. (Rashid, 2019: 41) Additionally, during the councils held from 1953 onwards, the Awami League accepted a groundbreaking proposal regarding the distribution of land among landless farmers based on the principle of "He who owns the plow is the owner of the land." (Kashem, 2021: 102) Indeed, none other than the real farmer was identified as the land owner by this party. Introduction of cooperative farming, establishment of agriculture banks, cooperative bank and other investment institutions, etc. were emphasized for the greater interests of the farmers in the League's Council of 1964. (Kashem, 2021). Furthermore, in the council held in 1970, alongside other proposals, regulation for the permanent solution of the country's flood problem were also accepted. (Rashid, 2019) Therefore, it can be claimed that in the ideology of the party, the rural population was given

due importance. The party had clear plans from the beginning to eradicate these obstacle areas to development of the village populace. In this assembly, along with other proposals, the Awami League demanded the supply of improved fertilizers, seeds, irrigation facilities, machine pumps for water, and the supply of pesticides for farmers. It also advocated housing arrangements for the displaced and presented demands for the distribution of land among landless people. (Kashem, 2021)

Bangabandhu's Thoughts on Village Development: Bangladesh Chapter

After Bangladesh achieved independence, Bangabandhu Sheikh Mujibur Rahman set foot in the newly independent country on January 10, 1972. As the head of the government, he sought everyone's cooperation for the reorganization of the country. He made this clear in his government's first official press conference (January 14, 1972) aimed at the reorganization of the country. Speaking about the devastation of the war, he addressed the situation in the villages during the press conference, stating, "... village after village has been stamped out." (*Daily Bangla*, January 15, 1972). Bangabandhu was well aware of the atrocities committed by the Pakistani invaders against the villages of this country.

On January 16, 1972, during an event commemorating National Mourning Day, Bangabandhu stated, "In every village, the houses have been burned down, leaving the seven crores of people of Bangladesh homeless." (*Daily Sambad*, January 17, 1972). Later, he recounted the brutalities and destruction perpetrated during the war in rural areas on multiple occasions. In other words, Bangabandhu kept remembering the villages with great concern in the context of the war damages.

In the efforts towards rebuilding the war-torn nation, Bangabandhu prioritized the villages by giving them foremost importance. He aimed to awaken village life and to awaken the entire country about the issue. On June 30, 1972, during a conference of the Bangladesh National Cooperative Union, he remarked,

... Bangladesh is the result of my dream, pursuit, conception, and worship. And that golden Bengal is still asleep in the perennially neglected villages, in the corner of the villages, in the heart of the extensive wetlands, and deep in the vast forests. Brothers, let us awaken rural Bangladesh through the magic touch of cooperatives. Let us shape

it into the chant of new creation and victory of life. (Biswas, 2020: 33).

He mentioned in his speech that if joint ownership of the tools of production in villages becomes possible, villages would flourish. He declared, "... today it is necessary to organize joint ownership of the laboring populace in the villages, towns, and ports through cooperative methods." (Barkat, 2015: 94). He emphasized the need to protect small farmers in rural areas and provide them with loans. In this regard, he gave more importance to cooperative arrangements. On March 26, 1972, while emphasizing the policy of nationalization in a radio and television address, Bangabandhu said, "Small farmers must necessarily be made productive. Keeping this in mind, we are trying to adopt extensive programs based on cooperative arrangements in rural areas. As a result... it will be possible to obtain loans on easy terms and quickly." (Biswas, 2020: 44). Alongside the establishment of cooperatives in every village, Bangabandhu stressed the importance of bridging the gap between rural and urban areas. Immediately after independence, he advised everyone to focus on the villages, stating in the National Assembly in 1972 that

... if we do not work in our villages for a month or two, if we don't move towards villages, we will not succeed. Teachers must work in the villages ... Otherwise, the distance that has been created between the village and the city today, it must be removed, and villages must be acknowledged for ... If we can be a little village-oriented, the country's welfare will come quickly." (Biswas, 2020: 48-49).

In this context, a few more observations of Bangabandhu are worth mentioning. In a public meeting in Dhaka on March 26, 1972, Bangabandhu said, "This government is aware of the disparity between the urban and village life. All those doctors and engineers who have become self-sufficient today due to the contributions of the jute cultivators should go back to these villages." (Naishabda, 2017: 51). Bangabandhu believed that "Farmers in our society are the most oppressed and exploited, and for the improvement of their condition, most of our initiatives must necessarily be directed towards them." (Naishabda, 2017: 50). Urban candidates for government jobs get more advantages over rural candidates, a sector from which creates a kind of inequality, Bangabandhu was vocal against this. He cautioned city commission mongers during a personal conversation, saying, "The poor, who live in the village, cannot come to you. ... I will teach those who would apply for my favour what commission is ... Only those who are eligible according to their qualifications will be employed." (Naishabda, 2017: 40). Not only in his speech did Bangabandhu emphasize

but he also personally advocated rural development. He wanted to establish village areas as those centers not only economically but also politically. Reminiscing about such an incident, someone wrote,

In April 1972, I don't remember the date. My father and I went to meet Bangabandhu ... a little more affection was shown to me by Bangabandhu because of being a member of Awami League family. He said, the country is independent. ... Stand by the people of the village. Now the village will be the center of our politics. (Alam, 2020^a: 44).

Bangabandhu wanted not only politicians but also professionals to go to villages and play roles according to their skills. In his speech delivered at the Mymensingh Agricultural University on February 13, 1973, Bangabandhu remarked: "You must strive so that we can go towards villages and develop them. Farmers can be uplifted." (Alam, 2020^b: 49-50) Addressing the faculty members of the agricultural university, he stated, "I want to initiate an agricultural revolution. You also need to become a little more village-oriented." (Alam, 2020^b: 50) In independent Bangladesh, Bangabandhu chose the village as a means to realize the dream of establishing a society devoid of disparities through an agricultural revolution. In his speech at the agricultural university, Bangabandhu declared, "... ninety percent of farmers live in the village. We need to go our villages. If I cannot make my economy people-oriented and cannot go villages, democracy will not be established, and an agricultural revolution will not take place." (Alam, 2020^b: 48-50)

Villages in the Constitution

In the constitution of Pakistan, there was hardly any mention of village development. This was not the case with the 1972 Constitution of the independent country. In article 16 of the constitution drafted under Bangabandhu's directives, it is clearly stated: 'Disparities between rural and urban areas shall be reduced.' Forced labor was prohibited in the constitution. Additionally, mention was made about the formation of local governments through elections (Articles 59 and 60). Also mentioned was the exercise of voting rights of eligible adults. That is, the nominated representative system in local government exercised for so long had been abolished. As a result, it was now possible to politically empower people in the villages and elsewhere. It was in this constitution that the idea of rural and agricultural revolution was inserted. In fact, the government of Bangabandhu was determined to radically change the long-exploited and backward villages. Therefore, during the drafting of the constitution, he

explicitly elaborated his idea of democracy, one of the four main principles of the constitution, on 4 November 1972 thus:

Which kind of democracy - a kind of democracy that benefits common people... In democracy, there are arrangements which serve to give 'protection' of the capitalists and democracy is used there as a tool to protect exploiters. We do not believe in that kind of democracy... We want the democracy of the exploited... so that the distressed people of this country get 'protection', there is arrangement to ensure it... (Hasina & Moudud, 1998: 44)

On October 12, 1972, in the Constituent Assembly, he firmly stated the four founding principles. About socialism, he argued "We believe in socialism, where there will be exploitation-free society. The exploiting class will never be able to exploit the people of the country again." (Hasina & Moudud, 1998: 32) It was with that goal in mind that Bangabandhu, after forming the government in 1972, through nationalization, changed the elements of exploitation from personal ownership to national ownership. He kept assurances he had given for so long by incorporating socialism and democracy as the two main principles in the constitution, to create an exploitation-free society.

Villages Envisioned for 'Second Revolution', 1975

The vision Bangabandhu had for the success of this revolution was centered around the village, just like the rest of his plans. Although before the implementation of these plans, Bangabandhu fell victim to assassination, he had already placed the village in a central role in the development vision of the second revolution that he had articulated. Now the question arises, how did Bangabandhu place the village at the center stage? Bangabandhu determined the agenda of the second revolution by changing the 'system', where through implementing 'Compulsory Village Cooperatives' in the villages, Bangabandhu dreamt of the success of the second revolution. On March 26, 1975, at a public meeting at Suhrawardy Udyan, Bangabandhu presented a brief summary of his plan stating thus:

... I want to go to a new system, where there will be multi-purpose cooperative in the village. Don't make mistakes. I will not take your land... In the Five-year Plan, one single co-operative will be established in each of Bangladesh's 65 thousand villages... The money will go to it, fertilizers will go to it, test relief will go to it, the work programme will go to it too. Gradually, those who are in the current union council, will be bidden farewell. Otherwise, the country will not survive. That is why there will be village cooperatives. I am announcing today that in the five-

year plan, in each village, from five hundred to one thousand families will be brought under the cooperative system. You will harvest your land, a portion will go to the cooperative, a portion to the government... My younger brothers, I am going to run the cooperative in the villages, the lives of the people of Bangladesh will depend on them. You have to wear half-pants leaving your full-pants. You have to take off your pajamas and put on lungis. And you will have to work hard going to villages to make this cooperative successful. (Mizan, 1988: 214-218)

It is undoubtedly true that in the country situation at that time, Bangabandhu identified agriculture as the main area to focus on for the country's economic development. And cooperative arrangements were highlighted as the prime policy for agricultural development. In this arrangement, land ownership remained intact while joint cultivation arrangements were made.

Conclusion

To Bangabandhu, colonial Pakistan was a total failure in case as far as of ensuring social justice to the village people of East Bengal was concerned. Since the inception of Pakistan, it's arguably understandable through Bangabandhu's speeches that Pakistan's ruling elite never attempted to eradicate urban-rural discrimination; on the contrary, they arranged things to widen the gaps between them.

In contrast, while in power, Bangabandhu was very alert about the interests of village people. In the constitution of Bangladesh, he, himself cautiously inserted provisions to reduce discrimination between urban and village people. He was pragmatic enough to understand that it was impossible to establish total equality overnight but it was necessary to try to reduce inequality with a well-thought-out plan. Continuous allocation of major portion of national budgets for the development of village and rural areas, arranging compulsory free primary education for all, giving equal treatment to village people for taking up positions in public offices and employment were priority areas of Bangabandhu. His thoughts on land ceiling to eradicate property inequality, arrangements to establish banks and other institutions in villages to ensure villagers' access to capital and loan, adult franchise, abolition of nomination system in local government, mobilizing urban expertise and amenities for villages were path-breaking measures designed to ensure social equality. These ideas surely carry the essence of John Rawls' 'The Principle of Justice', that is adopting the

principle of equality and make use of the opportunity principle and the difference principle.

Foremost among all the thoughts of Bangabandhu to develop villages and ensure quality life for villagers was his village cooperative project. It was all about a fair distributive approach of Bangabandhu to establish ‘democracy of the exploited’ and ‘socialism that ensures discrimination-free society’. (Hasina & Moudud, 1998: 44-45) This initiative was taken under that situation, i.e. Rawls’ ‘the original position’, where Bangabandhu under the ‘veil of ignorance’ endeavored to ensure maximum betterment and development for the villages that could probably earn greater social justice for them.

Bangabandhu’s thoughts on village development did not emerge unexpectedly, neither was it imposed upon him nor imported from outside. Rather, as a politically mature person, deeply rooted in the soil but having a broad world outlook, he crafted his development vision with great care and centered it around our villages. The core idea of Bangabandhu’s development thoughts was ascent from the root to the peak. Primarily, the plan was to empower villages first and then uplift the urban areas. This was the essence of Bangabandhu’s “bottom-up” model of development. In this model, cooperative villages would play a pivotal role. Bangabandhu’s cooperative village concept remains pertinent even now. Noticeably, the village-based panchayat systems in China and India are still quite effective.

Notes/References

1. In his memoirs, Bangabandhu reminisced thus:

Now Mr. Nur Mohammad Hossain was acting as the civil surgeon of Khulna...he asked me ‘why are you spending time in prison?’ I said ‘Because I want to grab power... if I can I will try to do something for the people of the country, can you do that by not assuming office?’. (Rahman, 2023: 183). In this statement, no doubt that this ‘power’ clearly refers to the state power which Bangabandhu wanted to utilize to change the fate of the people.

2. Certificate Case is a case that can arise under the Public Demands Recovery Act, 1913. Proceedings are initiated under Section 4 of the Act if the recoverable dues of Government and Semi-Gov-

ernment Institutions which are not satisfied are satisfied. If there is no basis for filing an objection or appeal and if the debtor fails to pay the amount demanded by the debtor within the stipulated time, first the arrest warrant and then the process of recovery of the amount claimed by selling the immovable and immovable property at auction is taken. (For details, http://www.bdcode.gov.bd/upload/bdcodeact/2019-07-29-11-47-58-105_The_Public_Demands_Recovery_Act_1913.pdf; https://services.portal.gov.bd/site/service_portal/983e9d2e-de03-4ae5-bd25-35f5cfad25d7/)

3. The term “non-elite” population refers to those sections of the urban and rural population which does not have direct influence on power structures or production machinery. They are not quiet Marx’s ‘proletariat’ class.

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