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GOVERNANCE, DEMOCRACY AND THE POLITICS OF WELLBEING.

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WeD - Wellbeing in Developing Countries
ESRC Research Group

WeD is a multidisciplinary research group funded by the ESRC, dedicated to the study of poverty, inequality and the quality of life in poor countries. The research group is based at the University of Bath and draws on the knowledge and expertise from three different departments (Economics and International Development, Social and Policy Sciences and Psychology) as well as an extensive network of overseas contacts and specific partnerships with institutes in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand. The purpose of the research programme is to develop conceptual and methodological tools for investigating and understanding the social and cultural construction of wellbeing in specific countries.

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Governance, Democracy and the Politics of Wellbeing.

Abstract

This paper examines the relationship between democracy and organised violence with reference to Bangladesh and builds on primary data gathered as part of a more general exploration into the politics of wellbeing. It highlights the significance of an emerging governance landscape that rests on two linked social phenomena: the deepening of political party activity and the rise of organized groups known as mastaans or musclemen. The overlap between political party activity and mastaan activity is considerable, and comes to mark the boundaries of social interaction; dominate the struggle for valued resources; and inform the articulation of wider social order. The co-existence of the two phenomena introduces an important governance paradox. On the one hand, the deepening of political party activity opens up of new democratic spaces in which, in theory, people can address their wellbeing needs in a more direct manner. On the other hand, the presence of musclemen controlling these new democratic spaces means that the practical struggle for wellbeing exposes people to intimidating and violent forms of politics.

Keywords:- Governance, Violence, Mastaans, Politics of Wellbeing, Bangladesh

Key Readings:-

Auyero, J. (2000). Poor people's politics. Durham: Duke University Press.

Devine, J. (2008). 'Wellbeing and the Rotten Foundations of a Development Success'. *WeD Briefing Paper 3/08*. Available at http://www.welldev.org.uk/research/bp/bp3-08.pdf

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Without doubt the social universes within which disinterestedness is the official norm are not necessarily governed throughout by disinterestedness: behind the appearance of piety, virtue, disinterestedness there are subtle, camouflaged interests
P. Bourdieu: *Practical Reason*

Introduction
In a recently published book, John Keane tackles the vexed and topical relationship between democracy and violence. In his opening paragraph he sets out the proposition that violence "is the greatest enemy of democracy as we know it…[and]… is anathema to its spirit and substance" (Keane 2004:1). These assertions rest on a premise that contemporary democracy, almost by definition, is characterised by its ability to manage societal relations and demands in non-violent ways. So even if we accept that democracy can take multiple forms, it is expected to at least possess core institutional arrangements (free and fair elections, stable legislatures and so on) and to promote basic principles (political freedom to exercise voice, accountability of elected officials and so on) that limit the need to turn to violence. The relationship between democracy and violence is a central concern of this paper. In what follows I will use primary data gathered in Bangladesh under the Wellbeing in Developing Countries (WeD) research programme[1], and show how the evolution of new democratic institutions, evidenced for example in the expansion of organised political party activities in rural areas, has coincided with new forms of local and national level practices of violence, evidenced in the ascendancy of organised criminals known locally as *mastaans*. Crucially these two processes are inextricably linked.

A Wellbeing Perspective
For some time now, the notion of wellbeing has been an identifiable policy focus for academics and practitioners in many parts of the developed world. It has been applied to contexts that cover a wide range of human activity and experience including national economies; social and political

institutions; personal behaviour, preferences and entertainment; and wider ideals and norms (Sointu 2005).

Although its emergence within international development studies is more recent[2], it has begun to attract increasing academic and policy attention. The WeD research programme is an international interdisciplinary initiative that looks specifically at the dynamics of wellbeing in developing country contexts. Established by the ESRC in 2002, the programme involves researchers at Bath and collaborating institutions in Bangladesh, Ethiopia, Peru and Thailand.

The driving force behind the WeD research programme was a dissatisfaction with conventional international development analysis. The concept of wellbeing adopted by the WeD research group attempts to connect different strands of development thinking as well as incorporate insights from other social science disciplines to develop a more comprehensive understanding of the dynamics of poverty[3]. One of the key features of the WeD approach therefore is to look at both conventional 'objective' measures of welfare such as income, health, education, nutrition and so forth; and also people's own perceptions and experiences of their lives. WeD's focus on material outcomes is therefore matched by the attention it gives to understand the processes through which people construct their lives and which affect the quality of their lives. In the research programme wellbeing is thus defined as a "state of being with others, where human needs are met, where one can act meaningfully to pursue goals, and where one enjoys a satisfactory quality of life".

In her overview of the history of the idea of wellbeing, Sointu (2005) notes that over time it has gradually shed its political edge to become "a question almost solely related to the concept of the 'body personal'" (Sointu 2005:256). Devoid of political content, wellbeing has developed into an

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[2] It is important to note however that wellbeing is not a completely new concept to development studies and policy. In 1986 for example, the UN published its 'Declaration on the Right to Development' in which it argues that the goal of international development assistance is "the creation of conditions in societies all around the world within which all people can reasonably pursue their wellbeing". One of the earliest and important empirical and analytical inquiries into wellbeing in developing contexts is offered by Dasgupta (1993).

[3] For more details of the academic influences behind the WeD research programme see Gough, McGregor and Camfield (2007).

attribute that is associated with personal practices, needs, ambitions, preferences and ethics. As a consequence, the main responsibility for achieving wellbeing falls on the individual and his or her life choices. This individual centred discourse is the one that currently dominates policy and academic discussions on wellbeing. The WeD research programme offers a distinctive approach in that from the outset it has highlighted the foundational role of social interaction, culture and relationships in shaping both the meanings that people attach to wellbeing and their capacities to achieve it (Gough, McGregor, Camfield 2007). In this approach the responsibility for achieving wellbeing is as much societal as it is personal, and this directs us more straightforwardly to an understanding of wellbeing that is firmly rooted in politics. Despite its positive and perhaps benign overtones therefore, wellbeing in the WeD approach is not a positive sum process. Instead it is an inherently negotiated outcome and invariably consists of tradeoffs and compromises both at individual and societal levels. This serves to remind us of an obvious but essential fact borne out in our WeD research: the poor rarely, if ever, attain the levels of wellbeing that those in more privileged positions achieve. And indeed even the capacity for wellbeing aspirations is unevenly divided between rich and poor (Appadurai 2004).

The findings reported in this paper derive from the WeD research programme in Bangladesh. We conducted research in six sites from two Districts in Bangladesh: Manikganj and Dinajpur. Our initial idea in selecting these sites was to use distance from Dhaka, the heart of the economic, political and administrative life of the country, as a way of capturing some of the diversity that exists in Bangladesh. Thus Manikganj is physically closer and relatively well-connected to Dhaka while Dinajpur is significantly further and less well-connected. In order to pursue the theme of diversity, in each District we subsequently selected one urban site and two rural sites. One of the rural sites was closer to the urban site and the other was further. From the very beginning, we were aware of the risks of treating these sites as discrete or separate entities. Indeed our overall research question and methodology picked up quite early the WeD emphasis on social interaction and relationships by setting out to explore how individuals, households and communities in each of the sites were enmeshed in different relational and translocal networks, and then how these different types of relationships affected wellbeing opportunities and outcomes.

5

The WeD methodology consists of a range of quantitative and qualitative investigations[4] into various wellbeing dimensions and aspects. Here we report specifically on a qualitative analysis of data collected from two of our research sites but triangulated through interviews and discussions with others in the remaining four sites, and indeed elsewhere in Bangladesh. Given that we wanted to focus on patterns and processes of wellbeing as opposed to variables, we made a conscious decision to build our analysis from a few case studies (Ragin 1987). We therefore began by exploring a national relief programme and followed our analysis 'outwards and upwards' to explore the political dynamics underpinning the relief initiative. As we moved outwards and upwards we also examined whether, and under what conditions, the patterns or processes we witnessed were present in other contexts. As will be demonstrated below, our findings illustrate how politics bear significantly on decisions regarding the distribution of key material public resources but also on the general struggle for domination and power in Bangladesh today.

Politics and Violence in Bangladesh – a Macro Perspective
The juxtaposition of violence and politics in Bangladesh is a familiar theme. The country achieved Independence in 1971 after an intense bloody war that resulted in thousands of deaths; the first two prime ministers, Sheikh Mujibur Rahman and Ziaur Rahman, were both assassinated; and from 1974 until the re-establishment of democracy in 1990, the country was governed under states of emergency or martial law. Notwithstanding this history, it is the recent period of Bangladesh where the co-existence of violence and politics has become a cause of deep concern.

On January 11, 2007, the head of Bangladesh's caretaker government, Iajuddin Ahmed, announced that he was to resign immediately from his post. As he did so, he declared an state of emergency, suspended civil liberties and postponed the parliamentary elections that were to take place on 22 January 2008. The following day Fakhruddin Ahmed was appointed as the new head of the caretaker government, a move that had the full backing of the country's military leaders. From the outset it was clear that the new interim government had a far wider agenda than merely organising new elections. It quickly signalled its intentions to implement a strategy of political reform that focussed on three key areas: corruption and violence,

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[4] See McGregor (2007) for further details of the methodology.

reshaping of political parties and administrative changes. Measures introduced by the caretaker government to specifically combat corruption have resulted in a large number of arrests carried out by the army and security forces, and reported extensively in the national press. These arrests have included the leaders of the two main political parties, ex ministers and high profile politicians, and some of the country's business leaders. Public reaction to the caretaker government's reform agenda was, at least initially, relatively compliant. Since the summer of 2006, the country had witnessed a gradual increase in the scale of violence and conflict, triggered by and feeding off ongoing disagreements between the main political parties. In October of 2006, this erupted into street battles that dragged the country to the brink of chaos and anarchy. Faced with an almost complete lack of law and order, the general public seemed therefore ready and willing to enter into an unspoken contract with the military backed interim government: an efficient mode of governance at the expense of some political and civil rights.

While the imposition of a state of emergency helped address the country's immediate law and order problem, it also brought to an end sixteen continuous years of democratic political tradition. The principal feature of the democratic landscape was the emergence of a stable two-party system in which both the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party demonstrated their ability to win elections, form governments and act as effective opposition parties. Since the early 1990s, Bangladesh has achieved notable success in both political and socio-economic terms and this reflects very well on the overall stewardship of the two political parties. For example in 2003 Bangladesh moved for the first time in its history into the league of medium human development countries (UNDP 2003). This 'graduation' has been inspired by marked improvements in consumption poverty measures and human poverty indices, and the achievement of many of the targets set out in the Millennium Development Goals (Sen and Hulme 2004). Over the same period of time, there have been important political developments. This is evidenced in successful general elections in 1991, 1996 and 2001 with high voter turnouts and external commendation for the efficiency and fairness of the elections. Furthermore in March 1996, an amendment to the constitution was introduced which meant that at the end of a term in office, the incumbent government must hand power over to a caretaker government which will oversee the new elections. In many ways

therefore Bangladesh has achieved a high level of political maturity and sophistication in its formal democratic tradition.

The dominance of two parties however has also nurtured what Sobhan (2004) has described as a duopolistic dominance of the polity in which the leaders of the two main parties are locked in a hostile battle that is deeply personal and lacks any real ideological content. As a result, politics has been transformed into a vitriolic, often violent, winner-takes-all contest. The following commentary captures vividly the dynamics of the duopolistic political system

> Democracy is strangled by a poisonous political war between Zia's right-of centre Bangladesh National Party (BNP) and the left-leaning Awami League. Rejecting any notion of bipartisanship, both parties seem to keep the nation perpetually on the verge of chaos alternating between state repression or crippling national strikes aimed at toppling the government, depending on who is in power. With politics often reduced to little more than a big brawl, violence infects much of daily life. Gangs armed with barbers' razors roam city streets, extortion is wide spread, beatings are routine. (Perry 2006)

This image of city streets being turned into an arena in which a political battle involving the country's two leaders takes place, is powerful. With opposition parties frequently boycotting parliament for extended period of times, the main political issues are left to be debated and resolved on the streets. Politicians are therefore replaced by gangs and parliament is translocated to the streets. While gangs are portrayed as key actors in the politics-violence nexus in Bangladesh, it is the profile of *mastaans* in particular that has grown significantly in the national political consciousness over the past fifteen years.

The word *mastaan* is normally associated with urban brokers or intermediaries belonging to the criminal underworld, and running a range of protection rackets and extra-legal payment and collection schemes. *Mastaan* covers quite a wide range of actors with godfather types at the higher end of the scale and hoodlums at the lower end. The verb *mastaani kora* (literally to 'do *mastaan* activity') can even be used, jokingly, to

describe mischievous behaviour. Although normally feared by people because of their association with criminal activities, *mastaans* can also play an important role in protecting and delivering basic needs and services especially in contexts like urban settlements where formal rights are weak (Khan 2000). This more benevolent image of *mastaan* is not lost to the Bengali imagination. For example, quite often in popular cinema, *mastaan* type figures can be honourable heroes because they end up defending – often at a cost of self-sacrifice - victims of unjust situations. Although there is therefore some element of ambiguity about the figure of the *mastaan,* their rise to prominence in the formal political process is generally seen as both indication of and contributor to the criminalisation of political life in Bangladesh. As such they are perceived as a major threat to the country's fragile democracy (Sobhan 2004).

Setting the Scene - Sholpomulle Khaddo Sorboraho Prokolpo

The Sholpomulle Khaddo Sorboraho Prokolpo (SKSP) was a national relief programme initiated by the Government and implemented through the Union Parishads (UP)[5] from October 2005 till October 2006. The aim of the programme was to distribute rice at a subsidised rate among the poorest households. Each UP had a SKSP committee comprising the chairman and the ward members (elected), representatives of the local elite (non-elected) and *gram* or village members (again elected). The committee was formally responsible for deciding the final list of beneficiaries and overseeing the implementation of the programme. Beneficiaries selected for the programme were required to pay a subsidised rate of 4 Taka per kilogram of rice in cash, and were entitled to 12 kilograms each month for the duration of the programme. Rice was normally distributed on set dates at the beginning of each month.

In Ajampur Union[6] where we carried out research, the UP was allocated a total of 130,000 kg of rice under the SKSP. The SKSP committee divided this up in such a way that 100 households in each of the Union's nine wards

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[5] Bangladesh has various administrative tiers. The country is divided into 6 divisions, each of which has a four tiered local government structure that moves down from district to *thana* to union to village parishads. Typically, a union parishad will have jurisdiction over nine wards, each of which roughly corresponds to a medium sized village.

[6] Names of people and sites have been anonymised.

would receive an allocation. The total monetary value of the Union's SSKP allocation was approximately 2,332,800 Taka (around £25,000). Although this is a relatively modest sum, it needs to be seen in the context of a wider portfolio of safety net programmes run by the Union. During the time of our research, the following programmes were also being implemented by the UP: the Vulnerable Group Feeding, the Vulnerable Group Development, the Food for Work and the Widow's Allowance. Taken together these different social protection programmes constitute an important welfare resource.

The importance, limitation and wider significance of material resources.

What benefits are to be gained from the SKSP? At the very basic and perhaps self-evident level, securing rice at a subsidised rate is an important benefit that has an immediate and positive impact on people's wellbeing. Some recipients for example claimed that the 'value' of the subsidy was equivalent to as much as one week's earnings. This is a significant financial help. Not surprisingly therefore, the poorer the beneficiary household (female headed households and households with members suffering long-term illness or where unemployment is a constant problem), the greater the perceived benefit of the allocated rice. During interviews however it became apparent that there was a deeper significance to the SKSP that is not fully captured by its monetary value. In discussing the value of the relief, those who made it onto the SKSP beneficiary list were very quick to downplay its significance. Typical comments from beneficiaries pointed out that the amount distributed '*is never enough*'; that '*the Government needs to do more*'; and that '*10 kg of rice does not change much*'. These comments contrasted with the statements of those who were eligible but did not make it onto the final list. For these people, the relief held an important financial value and not being able to access this was perceived as a loss. However the same people were also quick to focus on the wider significance of their misfortune. For most, the fact that they could not access SKSP relief meant that they were also unlikely to access other services and goods offered through the UP. This was simply a taken-for-granted and generally accepted assumption. The SKSP beneficiary list therefore signalled a wider systematic sanction that turned certain claimants into eligible clients and others into ineligible destitute (McGregor 1989, Devine 2003, Devine 2006).

The question of eligibility is directly tied to the perceived influence of the local non-elected political party leaders in deciding the distribution of rice. In

Ajampur UP, the key member of the SKSP Committee was the local BNP Union Secretary Mubarak Islam. Mubarak's influence on the SKSP programme was evident from the very beginning. When the SKSP committee submitted its initial beneficiary list of 900 households to the *thana* authorities, it was rejected and the committee was asked to resubmit taking into account a 'party list' of beneficiaries that had been prepared by Mubarak and his workers. The 'party list' contained around 400 household names and while most met the formal eligibility criteria, some of the committee members were unhappy because the list only included the names of BNP activists and supporters. According to the same members, the SKSP was the latest in a long line of initiatives in which local BNP party leaders had secured illegitimate control over UP affairs. In one of our focus group meetings organised to discuss the changing nature of local politics, the member who had served longest on the UP described the trend in the following terms: *Ram rajotte ekhon Rabon raja.*[7] I will return to this point in the next section.

Mubarak is a non-elected party official who exerts considerable influence on the UP, a predominantly elected body. His ability to do so derives from the positional power (Knoke 1990, Devine 2003) he enjoys, i.e. power directly related to and dependent on his standing in the overall political landscape. As union secretary, he has direct access to the party's district secretary and through him to Ministers. He is also responsible for party affairs throughout the union and has very strong contacts with grassroots constituents. He is therefore a crucial link in the chain that unites party to citizen. Mubarak uses this position and connections to drive his political agenda. Therefore he makes sure he is invited to sit on the main UP committees and he does this by offering to act as the non-elected representative of the local elite[8]. He is of course particularly keen to be on the committees that have authority to allocate funds or relief such as the SKSP, the Vulnerable Group Fund, the Vulnerable Group Development, the Food for Work programme, and the Widow's Allowance. He claims that his presence on these committees is

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[7] Ram is the central character of the Ramayana epic. While living a simple life in the forest, Ram's wife Sita was kidnapped by Rabon, ruler of the island kingdom of Lanka. Ram eventually freed his wife and in the process killed Rabon. His victory is interpreted as a victory of virtue and integrity over evil. In our context, the political leaders are seen as Rabon, an unwelcome, unfit and unscrupulous leader.

[8] In many UP committees, there is a place for non-elected representatives of the local elite.

necessary to ensure a proper and more efficient use of public funds. Besides having a say over the use of UP resources, Mubarak is also a central figure in deciding the use of Test Relief resources and Block Allocation funds (*thok boroddo*) since both of these are allocated directly by the local Member of Parliament who is in the same party as Mubarak. Finally, Mubarak also has significant influence on all the main development projects (the most important being construction contracts) sanctioned by Government to be implemented in the union. Mubarak therefore is well-positioned to exert influence on how significant resources, goods and services are deployed.

The importance of Mubarak and his party activists is not lost to those seeking access to the same resources and services. In interviews carried out in our WeD sites, we asked people to discuss the way relief is distributed and what, if any, criteria were used to identify beneficiaries. Through our interviews we were able to confirm that although those on the SKSP were poor (and therefore meeting the eligibility criteria), many as-poor households had been excluded from the list. All the SKSP beneficiaries we interviewed (without expectation) admitted that their inclusion on the beneficiary list was because Mubarak or one of his two understudies in the village had supported their case. Usually, respondents couched the reference in a way that stressed the fact that they enjoyed a good relationship with Mubarak, or knew someone who knew him. Perhaps more surprisingly, none of the SKSP beneficiaries initially justified their inclusion on the list by referring to the fragility of their economic status. In seeking to access public resources therefore, livelihood status can take you only so far. The right kind of relationship to the right kind of people seems to be what really makes things happen. This is confirmed when we look at those who did not make it onto the SKSP list. Unlike the beneficiaries, the non-beneficiaries were very forceful in highlighting their weak livelihood positions almost as if they wanted to convince us that only a perverse and unfair logic could have deemed them ineligible and therefore exclude them from the list. The logic they were highlighting was that they did not have the right connections (*jogajog*), or were associated with the wrong party (Awami League), or were unable to directly approach Mubarak. In short, non-beneficiaries complained that they lacked the basic cultural capital (Gupta 1995) required to negotiate and advance their claims. For both beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries therefore having the right connections determined their ability to claim SKSP resources. Both beneficiaries and

12

non-beneficiaries also admitted that their connection to Mubarak (or lack thereof) would determine the chances of making future claims on other services or goods.

One of the common accusations levelled at Mubarak is that he uses his position to favour his own people (BNP supporters) or increase his own power base. Thus goods and services move in one direction while support, usually of a political kind, is reciprocated. This is denounced as an abuse of power, a form of bribery and cheating, and an unfair way of dealing with public goods. The academic literature labels such exchanges between more powerful leaders and poorer people as patron-client relations – a theme that is recurrent in the study of poverty and political processes in Bangladesh. As McGregor (1989) rightly argues, patron-client relations are inherently ambivalent. On the one hand they are exploitative to the overall benefit of the patron and on the other hand, they offer much needed social protection to clients. This ambiguity is captured in the person of Mubarak. It is obvious that Mubarak has influenced the process for distributing SKSP relief so that party members would benefit. It is also common knowledge that beneficiaries would be expected to reciprocate by allying themselves in some way to Mubarak and his colleagues. However if we look closely at the ways beneficiaries themselves understand the exchanges and judge their relationship with Mubarak, a more nuanced picture emerges of the relationship. Although beneficiaries therefore acknowledged that their links to Mubarak helped them access SKSP relief, noone characterised the relationship as a power relationship, i.e. one in which they felt they were being exploited. Instead leaders like Mubarak were more often described in positive terms as *helpful*, *caring*, *attentive to the needs of poor people*, *fair* and so forth. At the same time respondents spoke of their relationship mostly in endearing and always in personal terms. Thus Mubarak *knows me well*, *loves me*, *is my para* (neighbourhood) *brother*, or *is my neta* (leader).

Mubarak and his party co-workers justify their actions in the SKSP programme in different but not contradictory ways. First of all, they present themselves as honest public servants *doing all they can to help the poor*. Inevitably this includes a comparative reference to when the opposition party was in power. Thus *if truth be told, comparing with the last Awami League period, BNP is distributing relief in a more democratic way.* And, as Mubarak himself explained, the need to distribute in a more democratic manner arose because under the previous government (i.e. Awami League

administration), *many people did not get relief because they did not have a good relation with the Chairman and Members […] but I opened opportunities for them*". The claim to be working in a fair manner is a central part of the repertoire offered by party leaders to justify their active involvement in UP affairs. Leaders like Mubarak fear being judged as excessively self-interested because their integrity is called into question. Even if leaders are known to cheat or steal, they need to be able to convince others that they are acting in a fair and generous manner. More than anything else it is the perception that Mubarak cares and looks out for people which qualifies and gives legitimacy to his actions. However the analysis needs to be taken a step further. The claim by leaders that their interventions lead to a fairer distribution of goods and services carries with it a veiled threat; namely, the fairness of future allocations will depend on the continued presence of the same leaders. This takes us to the very heart of the ambiguity that characterises people like Mubarak. The more people are convinced that Mubarak and his colleagues provide a more equitable distribution of goods and benefits, the closer they have to move to assimilate Mubarak's own explanation of his work and service. The status quo is therefore made doxic.

Politics and Social Organisation
In drawing attention to idea that *Ram rajotte ekhon Rabon raja*, UP members were indicating an important shift in the role of political party officials not only in UP activities but in social life more generally. This in turn reflects on a wider process in which political parties have successfully penetrated and organised their presence at lower levels of society (union and more importantly village levels). This is an important change that has its roots in the early 1990s immediately following the introduction of formal democracy in Bangladesh. It is a trend that has also been noticed elsewhere. For example in his longitudinal study of poverty in Jagatpur, Siddiqui notes that

> In 1977, political parties did not have their branches at
> union level, and even at Thana level these were not very
> well organised. Also, the focus of political parties was
> confined to national level elections. In the local elections,
> people with different political backgrounds contested, but
> the election propaganda was confined more to local issues,

14

and the character and reputation of the candidates, rather than their political affiliation. During the two decades, there was a significant change in this regard. For every political party, there was not only a Thana committee but also a union branch. Not only in local government elections for school/college committees, haat/bazaar committees, etc., political affiliations were now brought into play (Siddiqui 2000:316)

We have already seen in the SKSP how political affiliations have been brought in directly to determine the allocation of resources and also sanction the eligibility of potential clients. However our findings also reveal the salience of political affiliations in the everyday social organisation of communities and households. We were alerted to this quite early on in our research when one of the village younger leaders commented that real power in the village had been transferred from the hands of traditional leaders to party activists.

> *In the past, local matobors* (leaders) *ruled in the village and no one dared do anything against them. We had a number of matobors here. But this has changed. Now everyone is known as being of one party or another and people go to the party people for everything. In our village, you either belong to BNP or Awami League – there is no other way to get things done.*

The statement of Siddiqui and our own findings point to the emergence of new and different forms of democratic institutions which have in turn helped shape new practices that incorporate and modify local traditional power relations. In order to tease out some of the processes and mechanisms that underpin this change, I now turn to analyse briefly the historical emergence of political parties in one of our rural research sites in Dinajpur. The name of the village is Telkupigaon.

Until recently, the most influential household in Telkupigaon was that of the Huque family. They can trace their lineage back to mid 19th century when they were appointed *jotedars* by the *zamidar* Jha family who in turn had been appointed by the Dinajpur Maharaja to collect taxes in the villages under his jurisdiction. As a *jotedar*, the Huque family prospered by

accumulating land and by overseeing a system of sharecropping (*adhibari*) that enabled them to accrue significant profits. On account of its status and wealth, the Huque family enjoyed unrivalled and uncontested social power. Most of the village households worked on land leased out by Huque; and the family was also the main money lender in the village. Members of the Huque family were also considered moral and political leaders in the village, and were called upon to resolve internal disputes as well as represent villagers externally. Since the start of the 1970s, the amount of land owned by the Huque family has gradually decreased because of successive inheritance claims and the need to sell land to invest in other activities (mostly business and education). As the land has fragmented, the power of the family in the village and beyond has also eroded. Today the head of the Huque family still owns land but spends most of his time and energy seeing to his business activities in the city. Meanwhile the households that previously were tied to him as *adhiars* (sharecroppers with no occupancy rights) no longer rely solely on agriculture as a livelihood and therefore no longer rely on Huque for their immediate livelihood. The increasing fragmentation of land therefore has affected the social organisation of the village. Landownership no longer determines social relations in the way it did in the past. The old division between *jotedars* and *adhiars* has been replaced by a new one drawn around people's political affiliations.

Almost immediately following the introduction of formal democracy in Bangladesh in 1990, both the Awami League and the BNP began to set up formal organisations and structures in Telkupigaon. The introduction of a democratic era was an important catalyst for this expansion because during most of the military leadership of General Ershad (1982-1990), there were very strict limits on opposition political party activities. From 1990, the political parties were therefore freed to extend their grassroots activities in a more organised and visible manner. The opportunity offered by the break up of social relations related to the gradual fragmentation of land, helped the parties achieve their organisational aims. By way of illustration, I will focus here mainly on BNP's activities in Telkupigaon.

Many of the first households who were forced to find alternative employment outside of Huque's patronage, turned to rickshaw pulling. Telkupigaon is relatively close to Dinajpur and connected by a good metallic road that runs through a number of smaller market centres. Rickshaw pulling was therefore an obvious employment alternative to farming and the level of demand for

16

rickshaw pullers was high. As the first rickshaw pullers moved between the village and the city, they came into contact with trade union organisations in Dinajpur who offered advise on how to protect themselves at work[9]. Trade union organisations, like many other civil society organisations in Bangladesh, tend to be organised along political party lines and the main contact the first rickshaw pullers had was with the BNP Shromikdal (Workers Trade Union) in Dinajpur. The latter encouraged the rickshaw pullers from Telkupigaon to form their own group and find a formal meeting place in the nearby *bazaar* (market place). This led to the formation of a local Rickshaw Shromikdal which in the early 1990s had around 85 members. At the time of our research, this number had increased to around 800 members. The founder of the Shromikdal and the majority of its first members all came from Telkupigaon. In the village, one of the *paras* (neighbourhood clusters) is now formally known as the rickshaw *para*.

Those who now work as rickshaw pullers in Telkupigaon have little need to engage with Huque and his family. To solve the problems they face everyday, their first port of call is the Shromikdal and if this is not successful, they begin to lobby the Union Shromikdal or the union leaders sitting in Dinajpur. At the same time, given that BNP is in power, members of the Shromikdal can also approach BNP political activists such as Mubarak. Although most of the rickshaw pullers are from *adhiar* families, they feel that they are now the most powerful group in the village. Their claim is based partly on the strength and unity of the Rickshaw Shromikdal but also on the fact that in Telkupigaon there are a number of other BNP supported groups. The most prominent of these are the Jubodal (youth wing) which is very vocal and attracts a number of young men; and the BNP Gram Committee (village committee) which is meant to act as a formal conduit of information between the party and grassroots members. Members of the Rickshaw Shromikdal have an extensive network of allies in the village.

Although the different BNP groups have different aims and indeed may on occasions compete among each other, they share a moral closeness (Auyero 2000) or cultural intimacy (Herzfeld 1997) that gives them a clear identity *vis a vis* other competing groups (namely Awami League and its different local groups). Coordinating the groups is the responsibility of BNP

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[9] Rickshaw pullers transport people or goods and as such, are an easy target for those who make a living extracting informal tolls or cash payments.

party activists under the overall leadership at the union level of Mubarak. It is at this point where the significance of Mubarak's access to resources is important because these can be used to support the work of the many BNP organisations, and through them to increase the overall membership base of the party. For example the BNP list for the SKSP programme, although ascribed to Mubarak, was actually written up by leaders of the BNP Jubodal. The leaders of the different BNP organisations also take on roles that were once the responsibility of village traditional leaders such as sitting on informal village courts, becoming members of school or mosque committees, and acting as intermediaries to public services such as hospitals or agricultural extension programmes. There is therefore a significant reworking of leadership patterns in Telkupigaon, with new leaders being trained in party offices and its associations. Traditional leaders like Huque and his family therefore either withdraw from active leadership (as Huque himself has chosen) or attempt to rise to power from within the party structures (as some of Huque's family has chosen).

Both Awami League and BNP have established similar groups in the village and are constantly battling to recruit new members. The impact on the social organisation of the village is quite dramatic and gives further insight to the comment that *in our village, you either belong to BNP or Awami League – there is no other way to get things done.* The overall evaluation of these developments is ambivalent and usually depends on political affiliation and of course who is in power. Thus during the time of our research, BNP activists were enthusiastic about the changes and were quick to point out that the new system was democratic and that the time of the traditional *matobors* had passed. This was then a time of genuine democratic change in which people could pursue their rights. Not surprisingly, Awami League activists were less enthusiastic but pointed out that during Awami League's time in power, life was much better and fairer. Besides these partisan observations, there was however a more commonly held view that social changes had brought about an increased *dolio monobhab* (factional mentality) in the village leading to the erosion of traditional community units (*jamats*). Both parties were blamed for creating this state of affairs since they were aggressively recruiting people from the same *jamat* and in some cases the same household. As one respondent put it: *everyone is busy now with the parties and all the power is in their hands. One brother doesn't know what his other brother is doing, husbands don't even know what their*

wives are doing. The party influence is also ruining our young people. All we have is bisrinkhola (disorder or indiscipline) *everywhere.*

Violence and conflict
One of the most common concerns raised in relation to the increased *dolio monobhab* is that it increases conflict between groups affiliated to different political parties. The conflict can take many forms but the issue that attracts most attention is the increased salience of criminal and violent activities in people's everyday lives. It was in this context that people in our research sites referred to *mastaans* or *mastaani* behaviour.

In our sites we came across a number of different types of *mastaans* including individuals accused of murder, petty thieves and drug addicts, bullies and so forth. It became clear however that although there were different types of *mastaans,* they normally operated in a network that was hierarchically organised and governed through a set of informal rules and codes. The following diagram attempts to depict the full hierarchy of *mastaans* as it presented itself in one of our research sites. This is not a fixed list and in other sites we found different names being used to describe different *mastaans.*

Figure 1: Mastaan Network
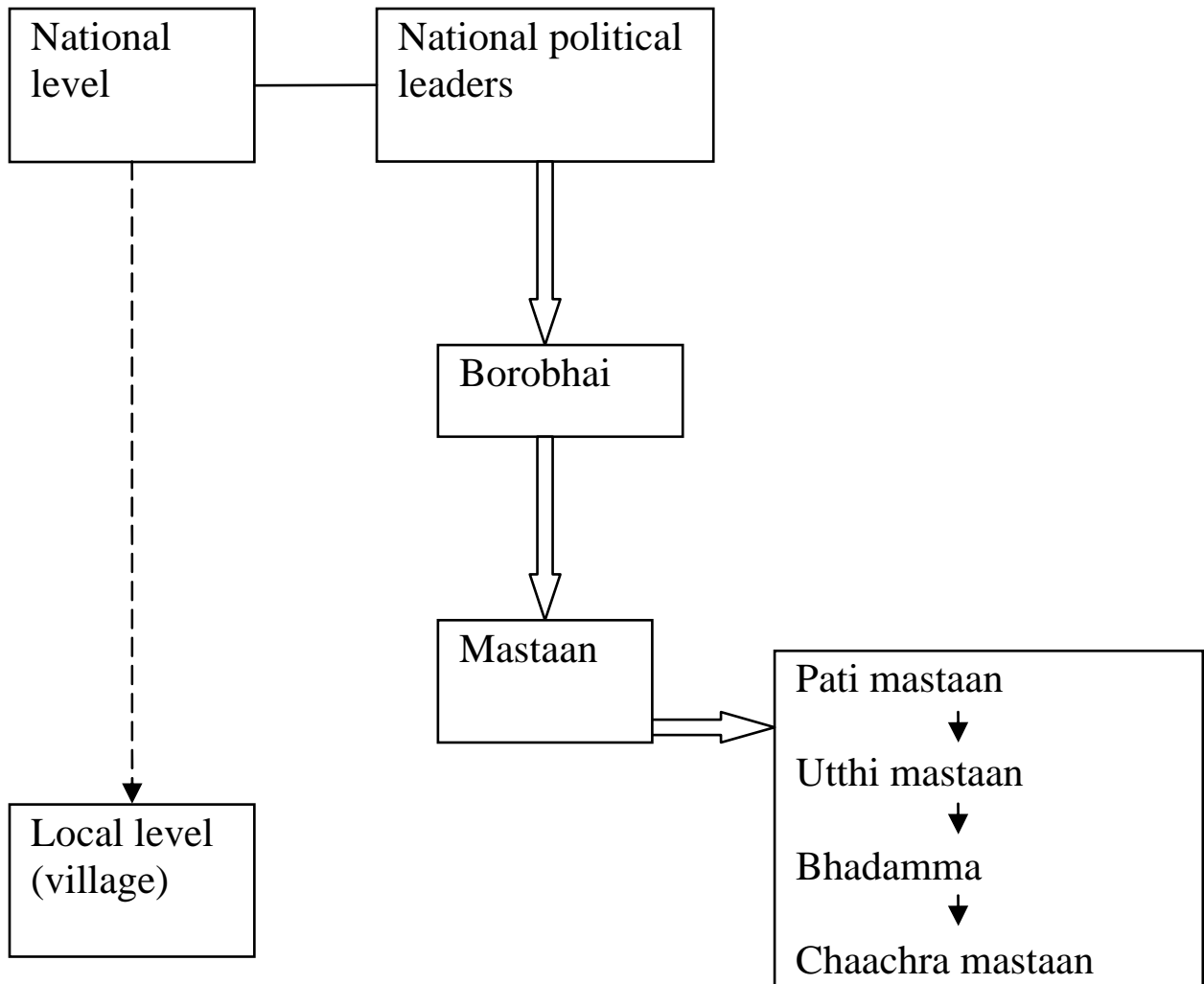
In order to understand the overall structure, it is useful to group some of the actors together. First of all, there is considerable overlap between the category of *mastaan* and the category of political actors, with the latter usually managing the activities of the former. In Telkupigaon therefore most people can trace the *mastaan* hierarchy back to elected or high ranking officials like Mubarak and even his political superiors even if they rarely use the word *mastaan* to refer to these same officials. This is an important first distinction. Although political leaders may call on the services of *mastaans*, they usually go out of their way publicly to distance themselves from

mastaani behaviour. Being a *mastaan* is considered a negative occupation and does little to enhance one's electoral credibility. On the other hand, *mastaans* rarely succeed in the formal political arena unless of course they manage to discard and bury their *mastaani* history. There is therefore a clear boundary separating *mastaans* and political leaders. *Borobhai* (literally big brother) and *mastaans* are the main actors who organise, oversee and carry out *mastaani* activity. Normally, *mastaans* will have a core group or gang that spend much of their time together. *Mastaans* will also normally take orders from the *borobhai* who has closer contacts with the main political leaders. Finally there is a hierarchy of people operating under the *mastaan* who act as his eyes and ears in the village but can also form part of his core team or gang. At the bottom end of the chain we find *bhadamma* and *chaachra mastaans* who are deployed for a number of odd jobs ranging from fetching tea and cigarettes to, in some cases, trafficking drugs and hiding arms. The world of the *chaachra mastaan* is a real initiation and training ground[10].

Is the *mastaan* structure a new phenomenon? Is it distinct? These questions are relevant because as many observers of political life in Bangladesh will know, *mastaans* seem to carry out activities that in the past would have been more associated with *gundas*, *cadres* or *shontrashi.* Like *mastaans,* all of these terms imply elements of criminality and violence. So are today's *mastaans* the same as yesterday's *shontrashi*? Given that the main task of the *mastaans* is to regulate and enforce, in many ways they are not that different from *gundas*, *cadres* and *shontrashi.* The primary means for achieving their task is intimidation and this can be exercised physically in a range of contexts including open gang battles involving the use of arms, and low intensity bullying carried out by *chaachra mastaans* in their respective villages. *Mastaans* can also intimidate without necessarily turning to physical violence. Threats or the fear of crossing the wrong path of a *mastaan* is a sufficiently strong motivation that can push or deter people from specific courses of action. So if we look at activities, there are strong similarities between the figure of the *mastaan* and that of the *shontrashi*. However what makes *mastaans* unique is not the activities they carry out but the structural position they occupy in the overall political landscape. At a time when politics has become increasingly important for gaining access to

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[10] I am indebted to Dr Iqbal Khan for pointing out that some of the most notorious *mastaans* in Bangladesh started their careers as errand boys for other criminals.

resources, *mastaans* have emerged as actors who have the positional power to exert huge influence over the way politics itself is organised and contested. There may be therefore be clear enough boundaries between the figure of the *mastaan* and political leaders but there are also many subtle and informal overlaps.

The SKSP case offers important insights into the nature of the overlap between political leaders and *mastaans*. First, as mentioned earlier, it was members of the Jubodal in Telkupigaon who effectively wrote the list of beneficiaries for SKSP relief that was subsequently forced on the UP. The Jubodal members have no formal position in the party and even less in the local administration. Their mission is to help promote BNP among the young people in the village and they are usually quite active in local political party rallies, strikes and elections. Some of the members of the Jubodal are the ones that are often called *mastaans* (meaning the lower end of the *mastaan* hierarchy). It is difficult to judge the real extent of their influence of how much actual power they wield partly because the members tend to be young and are usually known more for *mastaani* activities than their political judgement. However people in the village turn to them, often as their first port of call, to help resolve a range of problems including accessing health, education and other basic social services; negotiating with police or local legal institutions; attracting development or contract projects; and so forth. Evidence from the SKSP experience suggests that being one of 'Mubarak's people' gives these lower level *mastaans* significant and legitimised gate-keeping powers.

The second illustration relates to an incident that occurred on the day the final SKSP beneficiary list was confirmed. Members of the SKSP Committee met to discuss the list and the army sent a delegation to verify that recipients were indeed eligible[11]. One of the UP members of the committee (Golam Member) was on his way to the UP office when he was assaulted by a member of the public (Abdul) who happened to be a local activist of BNP, and also a known *mastaan*. Abdul had approached Golam to complain that one of his livestock had been killed in a road accident. Golam said that he would look into the incident after the SKSP meeting. Abdul interpreted this

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[11] The presence of the army in this whole process opens another set of as yet unexplored questions related to the overlap between political parties, *mastaan* actors and other state organisations.

as an attempt by Golam to ignore the issue. The two men got involved in a heated exchange and Abdul ended up hitting Golam. Abdul was captured by some of Golam's followers and taken to the UP office. There the Chairman listened to both Golam and Abdul and decided that the latter deserved to be punished. A case was lodged to this effect with the police and Abdul was arrested. Mubarak was present when the Chairman made his decision but said nothing in public. The next day Abdul was unexpectedly freed from custody and the case was immediately dropped. This incensed Golam who claimed Mubarak had lobbied his leaders to intervene in favour of Abdul. They in turn put pressure on the Chairman and the police to reconsider the decision to lodge a case against Abdul. When asked about his alleged intervention, Mubarak not only admitted it but also claimed that his actions were necessary as Abdul had been the victim of a miscarriage of justice.

While there is overlap between political categories and *mastaan* structure, it is by no means a perfect overlap. This creates an element of instability and uncertainty into the political terrain. Political party leaders may call upon local *mastaans* in particular moments and may even exercise ultimate control over them. However the level of control is neither dominant nor comprehensive. There are many *mastaans* 'in the market', loosely affiliated to and protected by party officials and structures. *Mastaans* can therefore be head hunted and hired, and skilful *mastaans* look to take advantage of emerging opportunities. Most *mastaans* claim to be self-employed as 'businessmen' - a rather nebulous term that covers a wide range of activities. For some *mastaans* therefore business means petty theft, operating informal protection rackets among local businessmen, highjacking and collecting informal tolls. A skilful *mastaan* can therefore make good money, and there is no shortage of opportunities for the entrepreneurially minded. Although *mastaans* can remain loyal to patrons or bosses, they can also be quite mercenary. Over time political power may change hands between parties; and even within parties there are internal conflicts and competing subgroups. This is not lost on local *mastaans* who see in party disputes, external as well as internal, opportunities to progress their own careers. For example in one of the villages where we carried out research, there were two competing *mastaan* groups affiliated with the BNP. The leaders of both groups broadly occupied a position of *borobhai* to their respective *mastaan* groups. Previously the two men had worked together with one (Mushtaque) being the boss to the other (Liton). Over time however Liton's stature grew and he established his own contacts with party

officials and other *mastaans* in Dhaka. Mushtaque interpreted Liton's actions as an act of betrayal and competition, initiated to eventually oust him. He therefore counteracted by putting pressure on the local Member of Parliament to have Liton sidelined. The MP obliged and as a result, Liton was marginally isolated and began to operate more independently of the MP and Mushtaque. However he continues to nurture his contacts with the other party leaders in Dhaka, and uses this network to further expand his army of *mastaan* followers locally. In this way he continues to strengthen his position awaiting the day either Mushtaque is moved aside or the local MP is removed. In the meantime, party leaders at the local level try hard to contain the competition between the two *borobhai* knowing only too well that their authority to do so is very limited, and that any of the two *borobhai* may one day turn against them.

Conclusion
Our findings challenge the rather complacent argument forwarded by John Keane. Although Bangladesh has enjoyed seventeen years of formal democracy and made significant progress on a number of socio-economic and political fronts, it seems that during the same time violence has become more embedded in the political fabric of society. Events leading up to and following the introduction of the 2007 state of emergency have served to highlight how systemic the politics-violence nexus had become. Why then has such a situation arisen in a country that was arguably enjoying a golden period in its history? The findings presented here offer important insights that help address this question.

Since the early 1990s, new and different democratic institutions have evolved in Bangladesh. This has triggered a reworking of institutional arrangements more generally that has allowed unelected actors such as *mastaans* and party activists to become more powerful and exert greater influence on the formal political process. This can be seen at both local and national levels. The particular way that democracy has evolved in Bangladesh therefore is inherently linked to the emergence of new forms of violence and control implemented by *mastaans* and unelected activists. This first insight is important because it challenges the 'in vogue' and policy appealing hypothesis that sees violence and social unrest as a product of poverty and poor distribution of wealth. The argument forwarded here is that it is the organisation of political life more generally which gives shape and legitimacy to the articulation of violence in the formal political process. The

problem therefore lies not in poverty but in the form that democracy has taken in Bangladesh.

The current situation in Bangladesh comes as a shock especially when we consider the huge international investments that have been made to promote 'good governance' in the country. There is abundant evidence to suggest that significant progress has been made to introduce a range of formal models and mechanisms of governance. However our research also clearly shows that the real conditions of governance that people have to contend with in their everyday lives are far more ambiguous, informal, exclusionary and often steeped in violence or the threat of violence. The preoccupation with ideal models and systems seems therefore to have displaced the fundamental governance question of how to enhance people's ability to negotiate their livelihoods and forge a sense of wellbeing in their lives. Whatever success has been achieved therefore is at serious risk for it rests on very fragile and uncertain political foundations (Devine 2008).

The analysis presented here illustrates that politics (and intermediation more generally) are an increasingly important means for those seeking to gain access to key resources, services and goods. This is not a new phenomenon in Bangladesh. However the fact that unelected actors such as *mastaans* and party activists have managed to secure strong influence over the formal political process takes us in new directions. First, it means that informal and sometimes shadowy procedures and relationships have become the primary management mode of the state. These informal relations are what really makes things happen in Bangladesh and are often the only way to have any chances of pressing home claims or demands. This then is not so much a world of citizens asserting their rights but one in which clients are continually negotiating their needs and preferences. Second, with violence or the threat of violence now fixed at the centre of political process, the terrain through which people have to negotiate their wellbeing has become even more harsh and hostile. While this affects and is shared by all groups in society, it is important to remember that it imposes itself in a very particular way on the present and future wellbeing aspirations of the poorest.

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31