

CHAPTER 6

POWER AND GENDER LANDSCAPE IN RELATION TO LIVING WITH THE FLOODS

This chapter describes the power structures embedded in relationships between, as well as within households, by focusing on the social structures which shape and also are shaped by what the people of Char Kalasona and Uria village do, how they behave, the respect they show, how they react and above all what they represent as their own life-world. The power structure is reflected in the politics, development activities and religious rituals within the society. Apart from power, gender also occupies a special place in the fabric of social relations within the Muslim society of my research site.

6.1 Colonial Legacy

Though the colonial heritage is less visible in Bangladesh than in India, the British colonial era (1757 to 1947) had a decisive impact on the economic, political and cultural life of Bengali people. The following extract from an international report bears testimony to how deep-rooted the colonial influence is:

“The country’s low level of industrial development is a legacy of colonialism. Before the British conquest in the eighteenth century, Bengal was one of the richest provinces in India. The fine muslin cloth produced by the weavers of Dacca (now Dhaka) was famous throughout the world and both agriculture and commerce thrived in the area. To meet the needs of [the] industrial revolution, the British transformed East Bengal (Bangladesh) into an agricultural hinterland, producing raw materials for the Empire.”

(Hartman and Boyce, 1978)

Nowadays, the signs of foreign influence are manifold. From a cultural and political point of view, the education system and the legal and administrative institutions of Bangladesh have been very much shaped by the British tradition. The political elite, the urban leaders and their followers are, like their Pakistani predecessors, ready to import not only western commodities and technology but also foreign ideas and tastes, as well as experts. Following this elite tradition, one very

popular rhyme for children is vogue in the primary schools and households all over the country. In Bangla, the rhyme goes: *lekhapora kore je, gari ghray chore she* or in English: “the one who studies, travels in cars and on horseback”. The deeper significance of this rhyme is painful for rural Bangladesh, because now educated young people do not want to do, not only agricultural work, but also any other job which lacks prestige for them. Though some young people have become disillusioned, many still are held within this illusion. The Chairman of Uria Union and some primary school teachers in Char Kalasona and Uria village are of the same opinion - that educated people do not want to come back and stay in the villages.

The effect of colonial influence can still be seen in the adoption and implementation of development projects across different sectors. Decisions over “the choice of technology” and over “how the project will be implemented” are not taken as part of a concrete bargaining process, but rather as an indirect result of the donor’s economic power and (usually) superior knowledge of the technical options, forcing the recipient country to accept a project design that is not optimal from its own point of view. In Uria village, I came across a sheep-rearing project funded by Oxfam and implemented by an NGO called GUK. I talked to the Area Manager of GUK regarding the selection of sheep instead of goats, and he explained that sheep are more “hardship-tolerant” than goats, plus that sheep produce more than two offspring at a time. However, when I spoke to people rearing the sheep, they told me that they had been given no choice and added that if they had been, they would have preferred goats, because goats are more in demand in the markets than sheep.

The public sector plays an important role in the overall development of the Bangladesh economy and this circumstance alone has created a strong bureaucratic element in the economic life of the country. All the investible funds are channeled through the state and in most areas involving growth and change, the state machinery is directly or indirectly involved. Historically, the Bengal state machinery was developed under British rule and as of now retains much of the old structure. Though public administration in most of the Third World countries is weak and inefficient, the malfunctioning of the Bangladesh administration is definitely more conspicuous than in other countries. Here, instead of encouraging private initiative, the public administration system creates more formalities and bottlenecks - even when private

initiatives are officially encouraged through specialized institutions. Almost every private undertaking requires permits, documents and state approval - a time consuming and frustrating process which in practice prevents 65% of the population – those who are illiterate, from undertaking many activities. According to a report about the Ministry of Public Works processes in this area, there are 72 steps involved in the preparation of expenditure estimates, calling for tenders, issuing of work orders etc.

As in the colonial time, the administrative system in Bangladesh is top-down and even the mentality of the administrative officers is no better than those of their British equivalents. Government officials at the local level are not responsible to the supposed beneficiaries; the chain of accountability is upwards rather than downwards, so the system is not sensitive to lapses in the field. This is why some villagers in Uria village told me that, in extreme cases such as breaches of the BRE, the villagers go to the local officials to put pressure on them to monitor the sluice-gate properly. Again, in the same way as the British colonizers thought it was the “white man’s burden to educate the black”, the civil servants of Bangladesh still think of rural people as passive, fatalistic, uninterested in initiating anything on their own, incapable of undertaking initiatives to change their lives, and that; therefore, they need constant prodding, supervision and spoon-feeding. In such a situation, a high level of personal commitment on the part of civil servants is vital to deliver the actions in the field.

Furthermore, the social, education and cultural backgrounds of the civil servants of Bangladesh lack the requisite orientation for them to work at the grass-root level. Most government officials come from the middle- or upper-classes and they have little feel for what it is like to be poor or work in the fields. As a result, when they leave their urban offices to make a field trip, it is quite natural that they find it easier to communicate with the rural rich.

Within the power politics that exists in Bangladesh, there has always been dominance by the towns. During and after the war of liberation, the majority of businessmen and top government officials, those who had earlier controlled the small industrial sector in East Pakistan (Bangladesh) and represented state power, packed their bags and left for Karachi. The new group of leaders who filled the resulting power vacuum in no way abolished the old policies and privileges; rather, they merely took them over and invited some of their friends to help. There is a popular joke in

Bangladesh that the 22 Pakistani families who used to rule East Pakistan were simply replaced by 2,200 Bangladeshi families. Most of the Members of Parliament in Bangladesh work in urban middle-class professions, including law, business, teaching and medicine, and many of them have more than one occupation. Further, the class origins of the political elites in Bangladesh are not based on the urban and rural elites, but are an economic and political fusion of rural and urban interests. More and more, big farmers tend to engage in business and in urban professional and political activities in general, and it is easy for the urban rich to buy-up agricultural land.

This strengthening of the links between the urban and the rural elites is also present at the local level. Three of the richest households in the village of Char Kalasona have this linkage between the rural and the urban. The richest man – Mr. Kabizuddin Sarker (aged 86) is owner of about 35 acres of land and has five sons of whom four are professionals and only one, the first son who is physically not 100%, is a farmer and stays in the village. The second son is employed in an NGO, the third is a lawyer, the fourth is a teacher and the youngest is the village doctor. Among his five sons, three stay in the towns and the cities and only one who is a professional stays in the village - because his job is in the village. Kabizuddin Sarker is happy with his sons as they visit him occasionally. He also told me that they rarely come home but that he visits them more often. Another rich man – Mr. Nurul Islam (aged 53), an owner of 25 acres of land, has one son and two daughters. He had his daughters married and his only son is an engineer, is married and stays in the town with his wife. Mr. Islam went to Saudi Arabia the year I visited him (2010) to perform Hajj (pilgrimage). The third rich man I spoke to, Mr. Abul Hossen (aged 55) is a freedom fighter and owner of 30 acres of land, plus has two sons and a daughter. His two sons are in government service – one serves in the army and another is a police officer. Both his sons stay in the city with their wives and visit their parents occasionally. It is interesting to note that all three village leaders are educated (two have an S.S.C and one an H.S.C) and they have formed strong connections between the village and the town.

6.2 Development Interventions

Changes in land use patterns through adoption of the 'green revolution' have also marginalized poor farmers in Bangladesh, as previously they utilized the fertility of the soil by rotating crops and using cow-dung. In the traditional system they did not use chemical fertilizers, but the introduction of HYV into agriculture has necessitated the use of chemical fertilizers as well as irrigation. Furthermore, the use of tractors instead of ox has led to people not raising oxen, and this has had a negative impact in two ways: the farmers have become dependent on chemicals and the households have started cutting down more trees to make fuel which they previously made from cow-dung. As a result, agricultural intensification has created further social stratification based on capital; those who have more land and more capital can use chemical fertilizers and purchase tractors. Thus, control over agricultural production has passed to a small number of *jotdars*, while the poor and marginalized farmers have become more marginalized, either as a result of having to sell their land or giving it over to share-cropping. The government and the intellectuals have not looked at the gap which has been created by the so called "agricultural revolution", because they think only from the viewpoint of an economy which counts GDP and GNP as measures of success or failure. The logic of development is that, if a country is poor and backward, so it must require connecting with the rest of the world through establishment of the modern prerequisites for progress: roads, communications and credit. Thus, modernity through development has made marginal people more vulnerable when trying to cope with stresses and recurrent shocks like floods, while the rich have become richer and more powerful.

Again, the introduction of green revolution technology has made farmers increasingly market-oriented; farmers with large holdings are diversifying their activities more and more, becoming not only landowners and moneylenders, but also traders, owners of electric rice mills and fertilizer dealers. Thus, the capital-intensive market economy's penetration into agriculture has connected rich farmers with the urban businessmen and political elites who usually control and influence decisions on matters of business and commerce.

There is everywhere a sense of desperation among the landless and small farmers regarding development activities in the villages. Development for the villagers mean building roads for communication, digging canals for the passage of water, establishing schools for education and supplying tube-wells, fertilizers and credit for agriculture and livelihoods. But the villagers see that all the money for these initiatives is channeled either through local government bodies or through local political leaders, and under this process, the local leaders and political activists get the chance to appropriate the money. Even the selection of locations for development projects depends on the power of local beneficiaries. During my field survey, I came across an ongoing earth road construction project in the village of Char Kalasona - under the government-run “40 day employment generating work” project. I observed the two points the new road will connect and found that the length will be about 300 meters. When I enquired about this, one worker told me that it will connect a house not attached to the road, and that it will not benefit normal people much other than giving them work. I then found out that the owner of the house which will be connected to the existing road is an influential local leader, and to be selected to have this road built, this local leader has constructed a small house as a ‘signal’ that a non-government primary school will be established. I then heard from people that there were no teachers or students, but that the small house had been used merely as a way to get the road approved. I raised this issue during the group discussion and realized that some educated people, like the primary school teachers, lack a political consciousness; they think that as the members and Chairman have already been elected, they do not need to hear ideas or suggestions from the villagers but have the exclusive right to take development decisions, whether they are appropriate for the general public or not. Moreover, the members and Chairman of Union Parishad spend a lot of money at election times, so they try to recover that expenditure with interest through different development works. The more development projects they can pass and implement, the richer they become, which is why Alam makes the following comments in his report: “all the benefits of *Swanirvar* or government sponsored development projects will flow to the rich and privileged few in the village” (Alam, 1976).

The main reason why corruption can arise in the administration of rural development programs is the simple fact that the benefits that are distributed are cheap and scarce, and are accordingly only handed out selectively. The limited supply and weight of subsidies for irrigation facilities, fertilizers, improved seeds etc., necessarily puts the officials delivering the goods in a strong position which can be used to his or his friends' personal advantage. One study carried out concludes that 'The control of powerful, rich peasants and leaders over the distribution and supply of fertilizers and insecticides is a critical feature of the village political economy' (Wood, 1976).

The landless or near landless lack both the economic means and the personal links with the government development officials that would enable them to reap the rewards of the subsidy system. Even the peasants with some land are left out, especially in the distribution of agricultural inputs, whose prices tend to be higher on the black market than they would have been in the absence of public subsidies and control. The actual administration of input subsidies usually makes inputs *dearer* to the majority of farmers, while confining the benefits of subsidies to the big farmers.

People at my study site have to carry out multifarious activities to support their livelihoods and have to live on low incomes. The population explosion on the one hand and development activities on the other, have significantly reduced the cultivable land available, with infrastructure programs such as roads and house building held responsible for this loss of cultivable land. It all started in the beginning of the 1980s when the then Bangladesh government established the Upazila Parishad. This new local government unit required the building of new offices in about 460 sub-districts of 64 districts all over Bangladesh. According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in 1983/84 the area of cultivable land in the country was 20,197,000 acres, but this had been reduced to 19,097,000 acre by 2010 (Prothom Alo, March 8th 2011).

The Green Revolution in agriculture, through the use of irrigation, has played a crucial role in Bangladesh by increasing cropping intensities and average yields per acre. However, the investment in irrigation has unduly favored major capital intensive work and as a result, has further polarized power in the hands of those farmers who

have more capital to purchase deep tube-wells and other necessary equipment, as well as fuel for power pumps. According to some small farmers, the choice of irrigation technique also has important consequences for the distribution of income and political power in the villages, because they have to pay one-third of their harvest to the water supplier. Often, a kind of patron-client relationship develops between the controllers and users of the water, where the users have to show loyalty in other areas; for instance, by giving political support on village and Union affairs. The more support shown, the more certain the client can be of receiving other favors, including a water supply and access to fertilizers and pesticides which poor farmers can normally only obtain on the black market, at high prices.

Apart from irrigation, weed-killers and other mechanical methods of weed control have begun to replace traditional, labor-intensive methods. With respect to Green Revolution agricultural technology, there is always a danger that accelerated mechanization offsets the employment-generating effects of the new technology itself. Mechanization can be a blessing, as it reduces the need for hard physical labor and enables people to work less while producing more; however, unless there is a mechanism in place that guarantees that the benefits are shared, mechanization is likely to do more harm than good. Within the present socio-economic structure in Bangladesh, a policy aimed at modernization through generous subsidies for the use of capital rather than labor, is bound to polarize society further - increasing the excess of men over jobs.

As a result, despite rises in household income levels, income distribution has become more unequal over time. The bottom 5% of the population received 0.77% of the total income in 2005, down from 0.93% in 2000. The bottom 40% of the population, which coincides with the proportion of poor people in the total population, received only 14.4% of the total income in 2005, whilst on the other hand the top 5% received 27% of the total income. The table below elaborates upon this inequality in income distribution among the rich, the middle class and the poor, including the difference between the rural and urban areas:



Table 6.1 Income distribution, 2000 and 2005

(Percentage of Total Household Income)

Income Accruing to	2000			2005		
	Total	Rural	Urban	Total	Rural	Urban
Bottom 5%	0.93	1.07	0.79	0.77	0.88	0.67
Bottom 10%	2.41	2.80	2.02	2.00	2.25	1.80
Next 40%	19.65	22.35	17.19	18.32	20.02	17.16
Middle 40%	39.93	42.03	39.48	42.03	43.82	39.97
Top 10%	38.01	32.81	41.32	37.62	33.92	41.08
Top 5%	28.34	23.52	31.32	26.93	23.03	30.37

Source: BBS, *Household Income and Expenditure Survey (HIES) 2005*

6.3 Religious Practices

Religion plays an important role in the daily life of a practicing Muslim. The people in my study area are religious in their mind-set, though some of them do not practice regularly. Islam provides a “complete code of life” for Muslims, but many people do not understand its deeper meaning or simply do not follow this code in their everyday lives. However, religious codes or customs influence almost everyone’s lives here, whether directly or indirectly.

Islam teaches Muslims to be early-risers, as they have to say their first prayers of the day before sunrise. This habit should have made the villagers healthy, wealthy and wise but, from my observations, many do not stick to this in their day-to day routine, but rather seek the blessing of Allah only when they get into trouble. Out of seven mosques in the two villages I surveyed, I talked to all seven Imams and found that they teach more about praying to Allah than they do in attempting to improve people’s lives. There are ways in Islam of gaining credit from Allah through the execution of earthly activities in rightful, honest and sincere ways, but the religious preachers usually do not teach the loyal simple villagers on this; instead they instruct on devoting more time to religious practices, seemingly so that they have to seek their (the Imams’) suggestions more and more. Thus, this represents an implicit attempt on the part of the Imams to become more influential in the social fabric of my study site.

Another form of hegemony in the society is established through religious channels. For every mosque, whether it is in the city or in the village, there is a management committee. I talked to some villagers about the management committee of these mosques and found that these are not free from power politics. The rich or the *jotdars* are always the presidents and secretaries of the mosque management committees; it is something like the UN, that is, the person who subscribes more becomes its controller. The *jotdars* thus become the heads of the mosque management committees by contributing more to them and thus exert their influence on the Imams at these mosques. The Imams are usually fed and paid by the mosque management committee and they are actually poor and earn a livelihood for their families from their services to the mosque. In principle, the Imams should be neutral and treat all members of society the same, but in practice they are seen to be loyal to the *jotdars* first and foremost. So, apart from economic and political issues, if any dispute relating to religious matter arises, once again it is the *jotdars* in Bangladeshi society, in conjunction with religious leaders, who settle the disputes.

Intra- household religious practices are important in shaping the role as well as the rights of family members. Though, in principle, Islam gives equal rights to women, in practice there are many controversies around this and as a result, discrimination tends to begin at home. In many village households, especially the uneducated ones, female members are treated as subservient to male members, as the grown-up female members cannot go outside alone, or without wearing a *nekaab* (outer covering garment).

During my field survey, I asked the villagers about the role of religious leaders during natural hazards like floods, and many replied that many of the Imams, being poor, cannot do anything except advise the villagers to refrain from sins and devote more of their time to religious rituals. I also talked to the Imams about their perceptions of hazards like floods and river erosion, and most of them said that these hazards occur because of our past or present misdeeds, though some of them also mentioned that excessive and sudden releases of water from upstream caused the flood hazards. Again, in answer to my question about their role during the flood hazards, they told me that try to extend help to the poor in whatever way they can, as well as give advice on how to follow the right path.

6.4 Gender Disparity

Discrimination against women pervades society all over the country, despite the continuous efforts of the government through various women's empowerment programs carried out nationwide. It is surprising to see that the subordination of women in society is an all- pervasive phenomenon in a country where the head of the government and the opposition leader are both women.

Women's social subordination makes them more vulnerable to poverty. One aspect of women's poverty is that the total number of poor women is higher than that of poor men. Various micro-studies indicate that the core of the poor is made-up largely by women. The number of ultra-poor (measured by a food intake of only 1600 k. cal./person/day) and extreme poor (food intake of only 1850 k. cal./person/day) is higher in female headed households than in male headed households. The HIES 2005 shows that about 29.6% of divorced/widowed women live below the lower poverty line, as against a national average of 25.1%.

Socially, there are customary biases against women. Women have few rights and choices when taking personal decisions regarding education, marriage, child bearing and family expenditure patterns, nor in terms of participation in labor markets and income generating activities. Discrimination against women at the social level is reflected in their limited movement within the household, their lack of mobility in the public space, the early age of marriage (average age at marriage for women is 20.2 years, while that for men is 27.6) and the practice of dowry. Women have weak protection socially and legally in the event of a break-up of marriages, and they fall easily into the trafficking trap.

Social discrimination against women has created such a situation that in many households the birth of girl is not welcomed, so for the poor households, having a girl becomes a heavy burden. During my household survey I discovered a very shocking incident. Lalmia (aged 45) heads a family of nine members, comprising four boys and three girls. He has given-away one daughter (aged 22) for marriage with much difficulty, and when I asked about the age of the children, I noticed that one girl who was present was said to be aged fifteen years old. When I told the mother that she did not look over ten, the wife admitted that the girl is actually nine years old but that they have registered her age as fifteen in order that she can get married. When I asked her

why they have done this, she replied that the marriage registrar does not register marriage if the girl is below eighteen, so, to be on the safe side they have increased her age so that they can be rid of the burden of having a girl as soon as possible.

According to the existing laws on inheritance and succession in Bangladesh, the daughter gets just half of what the son does in terms of the father's property. Even at the early stages of growing up, a girl notices that her brother is seen as more important than her in the family. These intra-household inequalities lead to lower consumption by women and they receive fewer benefits, especially in low income households. I have already mentioned that these inequalities exacerbate the vulnerability of women and girls in times of hazards and crisis. The skewed national sex ratio, showing a higher male population when compared to females (105 males for 100 females in 2008) suggests the presence of discrimination against women in terms of health, nutrition and other aspects of well-being, discrimination that originates within the households.

Women in society suffer in another way. Akitara Begum, a woman of 30 years of age, stays with her two daughters having been abandoned by her husband because she gave birth only to girls. She told me that her husband has married again and now stays with his new wife, adding that GUK, an NGO, had given her a cow through the Char Livelihood Project (CLP) so that she could earn a livelihood, but she has had to sell it to run the family. These kinds of poor women are made so submissive and ignorant by society, that they do not think of taking legal action against their male counterparts. Many women organizations and NGOs work against this kind of oppression against women, but discrimination against women is common almost everywhere.

Lastly, I will describe the cultural dimension of discrimination against women. Jorina Begum (aged 35) is the elected member in the seat reserved for women at my study site. Her husband is a teacher in agriculture in a high school in Gaibandha town, where he stays during the week - coming home at the weekend. I visited her on a Friday, and I stayed there one night. In the afternoon of that day, there was a meeting held in order to settle a dispute involving two young men from two different families in the village. I found out that the Chairman and other members of the Uria Union, including the husband of the elected member I was visiting, were present at the

meeting, but that the female member was not. At night, when the husband and I were talking, she came from outside and told us that her mother-in-law had rebuked her for going out of the house at night. When I asked her why her mother-in-law did not want her to go out at night, being an elected member for the whole village, she replied that according to her mother-in-law, daughter-in-laws are deemed to be *laksmi* (good luck) for the household, and that if they go out at night alone, without their husbands, the *laksmi* disappears from the house. However, I found Jorina Begum to be a pioneer among village women – those who are trying to come out from behind the traditional cultural restrictions whilst maintaining a kind of balance between traditional family bondage and women's emancipation. Jarina Begum is a housewife who cooks as well as takes care of family and children because her husband stays in Gaibandha town and comes home in the weekend, but at the same time she has to maintain contact with all the villagers, especially the women, and attend all Union Parishad meetings.

6.5 Summary

Power structures in Bangladesh society are embedded in the form of colonial influence, interference in the implementation of development programs, religious practices and gender discrimination.

Colonial policies contributed to the low level of industrial development in Bangladesh by turning it into an agricultural hinterland, whilst the educational, legal and administrative institutions in present-day Bangladesh are shaped much along British lines. In addition, development efforts towards modernization and the shifting of investment from the rural to urban areas all bear the hallmark of a colonial past

Development intervention through the introduction of the Green Revolution has marginalized the poor and traditional farmers by eliminating traditional and sustainable cropping pattern. The introduction of HYV and irrigation has favored the rich farmers or *jotdars* by increasing their production levels through investment, while depriving the small and poorer farmers of this opportunity due to a lack of capital. Again, with better political links and through corruption, the big farmers have been able to utilize the huge government subsidies given to agriculture in order to receive the benefits of the Green Revolution. Thus, in the name of development the rich have become richer and the poor poorer, increasing the level of inequality between them.

Furthermore, the use of land for roads, settlement and development infrastructure has resulted in a loss of agricultural land.

The prevalent religious practices tend to make simple, rural people less progressive and sometimes lead to counter-productive actions. Here also, power politics exists, but in implicit forms through the control of institutions like mosques and social units like the family.

Gender disparity is an all-pervasive phenomenon in Bangladesh. Social discrimination against women gives them fewer rights and choices when taking decisions on education, marriage, child bearing, participation in labor markets and income generating activities. Intra-household discrimination accelerates the vulnerability of women and girls, and this leads to lower levels of consumption among women in hazard and crisis periods, adversely affecting their, health, nutrition levels and other aspects of well-being. Culturally also, discrimination against women prevents them from taking part in development programs.