

## Other Countries of South Asia



## Chapter 11

# Beyond ‘the Net’? Institutions, Elites and the Changing Power Structure in Rural Bangladesh

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### INTRODUCTION

In common with other countries in South Asia, Bangladesh has been engaged in a local government decentralization process for the past three decades.<sup>1</sup> This process has taken a distinctive form, initiated as it was by the military government of H.M. Ershad who came to power through a military coup in 1982, and immediately set about trying to build political allies in the rural areas. Ershad’s system led to the formation of new elected councils in the sub-districts (known as *upazilas*), located between district and the already established union councils existing at the grassroots level (Crook and Manor, 1998). Since the fall of Ershad in 1991, the *upazila* system has been largely abandoned—though they still remain as administrative centres without elected councils—and successive democratic governments have instead taken steps to try to strengthen local democracy through the union council system. A second distinctive feature of rural Bangladesh that has implications for processes of democratic decentralization, is the relatively extensive and diverse NGO sector which has existed since Bangladesh’s Independence from Pakistan in 1971 (Lewis, 2004).

This chapter summarizes recent work on changes in the local rural power structure in Bangladesh.<sup>2</sup> Many researchers and activists in Bangladesh have viewed local elites as barriers to development

because of their control over land and tenancy relationships, the 'capture' of external resources flowing into the village for use in pursuit of their own interests, and the construction of patronage networks for their personal gain.<sup>3</sup> This perspective is perhaps best represented by the Bangladesh Rural Advancement Committee's (BRAC) influential study of *The Net* (1983). This study was prompted by a BRAC staff member's experiences with relief distribution to landless households during a 1979 drought. Despite large-scale government relief programmes, it was found that

resources were not reaching the poor and landless but instead were being controlled and enjoyed by a small number of powerful men, who had developed good connections with the local government officers ... a small group seemed to have obtained a very disproportionate share of power. At the same time, the landless people with whom we were working frequently caught up helpless in the meshes of this invisible network which they only partially understood, had a very small amount of power indeed. (BRAC 1983: 1-2)

The *Net* was essentially a piece of action research undertaken by an NGO, but the study resonated strongly with the dominant agrarian research tradition dominant during the 1980s among local and international academic researchers on Bangladesh's rural power structure. Although they carried a more explicitly theorized analysis of class conflict, fieldwork-based monographs by researchers such as Arens and Van Beurden (1977), Jahangir (1982), and Hartman and Boyce (1983) also painted a convincing picture of the rural poor caught within powerful and largely inflexible forms of structural constraint within the village context.

Despite the dominance of these perspectives and the obvious importance of some notion of a rural power structure, there were other researchers who began questioning, to varying degrees, the rigidity of these structures and the somewhat pessimistic implications of the 'net' idea. For example, Khan's (1989) field data led him to question the assumptions that a rich peasant/landlord class of elites simply 'captured' rural institutions such as agricultural cooperatives. Wood (1999) argued that an 'agricultural reformation' was taking place in rural Bangladesh in which rural actors were starting to deploy a wider range of strategies afforded by new technologies such as shallow

tube-well irrigation to negotiate structural constraints and restructure agricultural production. Following from this position, Lewis (1991) used an actor-oriented approach in one village to examine the ways in which the reorganization of agricultural production under the introduction of a range of new technologies and market growth, while not necessarily broadening the poor's access to economic opportunities in any systematic way, was nevertheless widening the scope for new roles and transactions and weakening the land-based power base of traditional rural elites.<sup>4</sup> Such accounts suggest that 'conflict and capture' issues were either over emphasized in Bangladesh literature in the first place, a point made by Palmer-Jones (1999) in his critique of the 'agrarian structuralist' view in relation to agricultural growth, or were becoming overtaken by patterns of broader agrarian change.

What is generally agreed is that the local power structure, though pervasive, is not static.<sup>5</sup> Bode (2002) has cast important new light on the changing composition of rural elites from the 1980s onwards, as new rural wealth accumulation based on the privatized introduction of modern high-yielding farming technologies (such as irrigation equipment or mechanized tillers) took place among entrepreneurial farming households. This new group did not always correspond with the traditional larger land-holding elite that had made up the main body of the local power structure at the village level. The new elites built and expanded livelihoods based on agricultural technologies such as tube-well equipment; as a result, land ownership alone was no longer the main determinant of rural power (Lewis 1991; Wood 1999). Many of these elites are now exploring new avenues of livelihood expansion and consolidation, such as building party political networks, diversifying economic activities, engaging in philanthropic action, and setting up new local NGOs, all with varied social impacts. A broader range of 'distributional coalitions' (see Pfaff-Czarnecka, this volume) may be emerging.

Some earlier accounts of the rural power structure also paid insufficient attention to relations of co-existence and cooperation, or to certain types of market transaction that may create opportunities for win-win outcomes for both rich and poor. Recent work by Naomi Hossain, based on field experience among programme staff at BRAC, suggests that in some cases, "... village elites can be engaged to provide an 'enabling environment' for the ultra-poor, and indeed, to promote their development" (N. Hossain, 2004: 1). While also

acknowledging *The Net* as an important starting point, Hossain and others at BRAC have become interested in re-visiting work on the relations of exploitation to understand better “the conditions under which solidarity with the poor becomes possible” (*ibid.*). For example, BRAC is finding that some members of village elites may be prepared to get involved in joint work in improving village water and sanitation with direct benefits for the very poor, simply because elites may view sanitation as a ‘public bad’ and therefore are prepared to invest in improvements.<sup>6</sup> Blair’s analysis of openings for support to civil society and pro-poor initiatives in Bangladesh, similarly suggests that “forging coalitions with non-poor groups to press for more broad-based agendas” (2003: 1) is more likely to build local capacities for change than confronting the power structure head on. Such work suggests that while elites remain powerful and dominant, there may be some unexplored ‘room for manoeuvre’ within the local power structure and its relationships.

## ANALYZING THE LOCAL POWER STRUCTURE

### **Institutions, Power and Poverty**

The local power structure can best be understood in terms of five clusters of institutions, as set out in Table 11.1. Institutions help structure the daily lives of rural people at the village level, in terms of access to resources and the structuring of social relationships, and both facilitate and constrain their livelihood strategies. Following the work of North (1990), institutions can be seen as frameworks for socially constructed rules and norms. These may be *formal*, as in the case of institutions based on rules and contracts, or *informal*, as in the case of social norms and cultural practices. In rural Bangladesh, both formal institutions (such as local government structures or NGOs) and informal institutions (such as dispute settlement mechanisms, norms of gender subordination, or networks of access to services) are equally important.

Research on the rural power structure has usually tended to emphasize, on the one hand, rural elites and their institutional power and, on the other, the highly constrained livelihood strategies of the mainly landless poor. Elites draw power from their control of key resources (of which land has traditionally been the most important,

**Table 11.1 A General Outline of Key Institutions in Bangladesh**

Administrative	Political	Judiciary	'Formal' Civil Society	'Informal' Civil Society
Secretariat (36 Ministries and 17 Divisions)	300 member Parliament elected directly by constituents, plus 45 (recently updated from 30) women members selected by MPs	High Court	Association of Development NGOs of Bangladesh (ADAB) National NGOs (for example, BRAC)	Elites and their formal and informal relationships (for example, positions of power in government, civil society, business plus patronage and kin networks)
	Bilateral and multilateral international donors—governance and conditionality		The new Federation of NGOs of Bangladesh (FNB)	Social norms, for example, gender relations
	Political parties		Chambers of Commerce	as above
Departments (254) and Directorates, boards				
(173) with civil service of 950,000 staff			District courts with magistrates and judges	as above
Divisions (6)				as above
Zila (district) (64)	Political party organisation and networks		District level FNB chapters	
			Regional NGOs (for example, Samata) and their groups	

(Table 11.1 *continued*)

(Table 11.1 continued)

Administrative	Political	Judiciary	'Formal' Civil Society	'Informal' Civil Society
Upazila (sub-district) (460) Municipalities (254) Line ministry officials Upazila Nirbahi Officer (UNO)	Local branch offices of national political parties	Formal land dispute court (AC land) Police station	Field offices of national NGOs Local NGOs	as above
Upazila Development and Coordination Committee (UDCC)	Union Parishad with a directly elected Chairman, 9 general seats for members, plus 3 seats specially reserved for women	Village courts (rarely effective, now largely defunct)	Business associations User cooperatives	as above
Unions (4422) Union committees for school, market, law and order, and so on.	Union branches of national political parties			
Villages (87,000)	Newly introduced gram sarkar or 'village government' (actually at 'ward' level, with 9 wards per union) Political party activists	Village development and welfare associations NGO-formed grassroots groups	Gusti patrilineages Samaj social groupings Informal leadership Mosque/temple committees Shalish informal courts Philanthropic activities Local gherao movements Social movements	

but also development resources coming in from outside the village) and local relationships (such as kinship and patronage). For the poor, who form the majority in rural Bangladesh, there is little or no ownership of farmland and therefore a strong reliance on livelihoods based on wage labour, self-employment, and forms of agricultural tenancy. As Bode and Howes have written, “for the poor, there remain rather few alternatives to forming dependent bonds with the wealthy in order to secure access to employment or land, or to the official programmes offering relief or off-farm employment” (2002: xv). Bode (2002) takes the formal/informal distinction in the context of rural Bangladesh further, showing how ‘formal institutions’ such as the union *parishad* and various village-level committees, derive legitimacy from democratic political principles, while ‘informal institutions’ such as *gusti* (lineages) and *samaj* (religious community or congregation) are structured by kinship, hierarchy, reciprocity and other long-standing forms of social relations.<sup>7</sup>

## **Governance and Administration**

Bangladesh’s governance problems have been well documented. Moore’s (2003) concise and powerful overview sets out four general sets of issues. At the level of formal administration, there is a very weak level of *autonomy*, such that most government and public institutions are dominated by a single, relatively narrow national elite that tends to deploy authority for personal ends rather than being subject to control by elected governments. There is very little separation of formal governance structures from wider society. Second, there is a low level of *institutionalization* of governance structures, as a result of an authoritarian inheritance from the colonial period. Moore shows how the processes of state creation in 1947 and 1971 have left political and governance institutions only weakly institutionalized. Third, Bangladesh also suffers from a lack of political *pluralism*: rural political organization is relatively atomized and localized, (without, for example, the caste-based political structures of India) and it is dominated by a post-1971 elite that has built strong political connections with the aid industry. The two main political parties, the Awami League and the Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP), while alternating in power since electoral democracy was secured in 1991, have a conflictual relationship and have found themselves completely

unable to cooperate constructively in policy debate. Finally, the state has found *penetration* of wider society and institutions difficult due to the physical environment and low rural productivity, ultimately leaving few incentives for the state to impose its authority.

The lowest rungs of local government are the unions, each of which has an elected council known as the *union parishad*. Recent efforts towards decentralization, though incomplete, have pushed the basic unit of local government down from the *upazila* (sub-district) level—where there are no longer elected representatives—to that of the *union parishad*.<sup>8</sup> This council has existed since the British colonial period and currently has 13 members. With its various committees, it has responsibilities for rural development, education, law and order, local roads, and *hat/bazaar* revenue collection and allocation (Bode, 2002).<sup>9</sup> There is, however, considerable tension between officials and elected council representatives. Members of Parliament play an advisory role on the *upazila* development committee and sign off on central development funds for projects, but at the same time they play strong informal roles along with their national political party activists, in the pursuit of their interests locally and they seek to manage and maintain ‘vote-banks’ at the local level. The union and *upazila* Chairmen are not formally elected on party lists, but they are normally affiliated with one of the main political parties.

## **Judiciary**

Alongside these political actors are the formal and informal institutions of the judiciary. From the Supreme Court in Dhaka, the judicial institutions extend outwards to the district level, where there are formal courts. Access to justice, however, is expensive and regarded by many people as ineffective. Instead, there is considerable use made of the informal local dispute settlement system known as *shalish*, in which traditional *samaj* leaders from local elites (see below) provide an arbitration service at village level. The *shalish* is officially recognized as part of Bangladesh’s legal system. According to Bode and Howes,

The Supreme Court continues to command widespread support, but District Courts exhibit major shortcomings and are generally held in low regard. An antiquated structure makes it difficult for

the judiciary to plan effectively ... Judges have to perform many administrative functions, and together with other factors, this contributes to serious delays, and to an ever-growing backlog of cases. Poor remuneration provides a fertile breeding ground for corrupt practices, and these, in turn, raise the cost of access to a level that is prohibitive for all but the relatively well-off. (Bode and Howes, 2002: xiii)

A system of formal village courts located at the union *parishad*, which has rarely been effective, has now in most cases disappeared. This leaves the traditional informal *shalish* as the dominant means of adjudication for small-scale civil and criminal disputes.<sup>10</sup> *Shalish* is best understood as a process rather than a formal set of rules or procedures and the degree to which its judgements are formalized varies, often depending on the seriousness of the dispute (A. Hossain, 2003).

Bangladesh has one of the lowest ratios of police officers to heads of population anywhere in the world, with low levels of training, education and coordination among all but the very small number of senior officers. A high level of corruption can be found throughout.

[F]or poor people who lack the necessary resources, it is almost impossible to initiate or pursue a case. As a result, a large amount of criminal activity goes unreported, with certain powerful interests in rural society able to act with impunity in pursuing their interests at the direct expense of the weak and poor, or through protected illegal activities including smuggling and fraud. (Bode and Howes, 2002: xiii)

## Civil Society

The term 'civil society', while analytically somewhat vague, can be broadly conceived of as the organized sphere of citizen activity beyond the state, the market, and the household. Bangladesh has become internationally known for its high profile civil society sector, chiefly represented in Bangladesh by a diverse and extensive community of NGOs (DFID, 2000).<sup>11</sup> While elements of the NGO sector in Bangladesh share some of the more developmentally negative characteristics of NGOs documented elsewhere in the region (for example, for Pakistan, Mohmand, this volume), such as political patronage,

lack of accountability, self-serving opportunism, or over-dependence on foreign aid and ideas, the unique historical circumstances in which the sector has developed in Bangladesh (involving a constructive interaction between local ideas for development innovation and flows of international resources), has given rise to a relatively varied and dynamic set of organizations (Lewis, 2004).

So far, these large and formal NGOs have received far more analytical attention than a range of other actors, such as business associations, self-help groups, cooperatives, religious welfare organizations, and philanthropic institutions, which impoverishes our understanding of the term 'civil society' (Lewis, 2004). Most NGOs have been concerned mainly with delivering services to the poor, primarily in the form of credit, but also education and health. Only a few, such as Nijera Kori and Samata, have focussed on social mobilization efforts in the form of enforcing rights of the poor to access *khas* (reclaimed) land and waterbodies, scrutinizing local authorities' allocations of welfare goods such as Vulnerable Group Feeding (VGF) cards, and supporting gender rights.<sup>12</sup>

Nevertheless, the NGOs constitute an important set of actors in Bangladesh, and many have helped to provide credit that has contributed to improved self-reliance among the poor, supplemented or substituted for weak or failed public services in areas such as education and health, and built organizational capacity at the local level—in Robert Putnam's (2000) terms “bonding social capital”—at the local level through their group formation work (Blair, 2003). Where they are weaker, as Blair argues, is in building public accountability for poor citizens through advocacy, that is, ‘bridging social capital’), and in reaching the very poorest—sometimes termed the ‘ultra-poor’—section of the population. Blair also argues that the lack of organized farmer groups in rural areas (as compared to India) is a missing element of civil society which could in theory bring benefits for the poor in rural areas if it were to emerge. The same is also true in relation to organized groups of poor women, which are not common except as offshoots of formal NGOs.

Finally, there is a wide range of social institutions of civil society that have a strong informal dimension, which also form a crucial element of the overall power structure.<sup>13</sup> This includes what might be termed an informal (or semi-formal) governance system, from patron-client networks to kinship structures and religious assemblies. This structures relationships locally but also links local relationships

into wider district, national and international levels. The *samaj*, the local residential community (the word also means 'society' more generally), is the main social institution, and emerges from the religious congregation and neighbourhood. It usually operates in the context of factional conflicts that may arise in relation to resource disputes or crises, rather than existing in an everyday sense. The *samaj* is, according to Bertocci (2001), an indigenous unit that is relatively free-floating, since it is detached both from local government structures and from religious bureaucracies. It depends primarily on the power of elite charismatic leaders and their supporters, framed in forms of patron and client relationships. Support to these leaders, argues Bode (2002), does not guarantee benefits and resources for followers, but opposition is likely to result in exclusion from any benefits. Bertocci suggests that the *samaj* also provides a framework for moral order in which followers may have means of redress if leaders are seen to behave in ways which offend norms of justice and morality.

The term *gusti* or lineage refers to a group composed of several related families within a village, which has traditionally formed the basis for the organization of agricultural labour and systems of reciprocity. The term is a somewhat flexible one, however, and there may not be clear agreement about the precise membership of *gusti*. It may be common for poorer families to seek membership in order to claim benefits while wealthier households may seek to limit membership in order to safeguard resources (Jansen, 1987). Indeed, clientelism is a key feature of social life (Wood, 2001). Patron-client relationships have long been a dominant form of social organization, structuring relations between rich and poor. For landowners, such relationships can be used to 'tie in' the poor to unfavourable or exploitative relationships around land tenure or money lending. For the poor themselves, the negotiation of patron-client relationships provides access to resources and a measure of social security in the absence of more favourable alternative livelihood options. Such relations of exploitation are nevertheless balanced social norms and values, as Bode and Howes point out:

... moral values, rooted in religion and kin-based social institutions, have served to partially constrain the rich; obliging them to engage in redistributive activities and to provide minimal safety nets if they wish to command respect and secure sustained political support. (2002: vi)

The importance, for example, of mosque and temple committees and informal *samaj* leaders at the local level is also apparent in Bode (2002). Local informal leaders build their reputations through participation in public activities, such as the *jama'at* and its provision of *zakat* charitable redistribution. Patron-client relationships are also reproduced within other areas of institutional life, such as within the government and NGO organizations, and in relationships between organizational actors. Bode also shows the ways in which the local mosque committee may be interlinked with formal political process through the weekly sermon (*khutba*). At election time, candidates favoured by the committee are invited to address the *jama'at* and even tour the village during their election campaigns, being careful to maintain a non-political façade by presenting themselves as 'patrons of the congregations' ready to donate materials for mosque repairs and improvements.

## **LOCAL EXPERIENCES AND PERCEPTIONS IN THREE VILLAGES**

The main findings from the fieldwork are summarized in Table 11.2. The first remote village is located in a riverine *char* area that is prone to heavy flooding. Due to the lack of local economic opportunities, many people migrate daily to the local town for work, thus broadening people's networks (and their choice of patrons) well beyond the village. This has made 'traditional' power structures less rigid. The role of the union *parishad* in village affairs has grown more pronounced, and it has become politicized. The union *parishad* now plays a 'brokerage' role between village-level institutions and the outside world of resources and politics.

For example, one of the union *parishad* women members was a landless woman who had been elected from an NGO group and become active in local politics as a BNP member. She had gained the support of her local MP, who had influenced the union Chairman to give her control of a road repair project, even though this had upset other male members of the council who had expected to control the project. Although she had had to pay them some of the money to facilitate the project, the strength of her external political contacts allowed her to challenge both local social norms, in terms of gender, and local interests, in terms of traditional resource capture.

**Table 11.2 Summary of Main Fieldwork Findings**

Type of Institution	The remote village	The well-connected village	The peri-urban village
Administrative	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Union <i>parishad</i> (UP) operates through balancing local interests quite well, but is increasingly politicized</li> <li>– UP acts as broker between local and outside interests</li> <li>– <i>Gram sarkar</i> operates, but is viewed as a party tool</li> <li>– A low level of local resource mobilization</li> <li>– Institutionalized corruption in the form of project 'speed money'</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– UP has a strong source of market revenue from local markets (<i>hats</i>)</li> <li>– A dynamic union Chairman in place with a strong developmental vision for union</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– The Chairman is son of a previous former Chairman (family dynasty)</li> <li>– Relatively prosperous union due to out-migration to local towns and to the Middle East</li> <li>– higher than normal female participation in UP after rights training</li> <li>– <i>Gram sarkar</i> weak due to conflict between <i>matbars</i> and government officials</li> </ul>
Political	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– BNP/UP and MP with party network power base</li> <li>– Strong political traditions, including history of leftwing activism</li> <li>– High level of 'politicization' of institutions</li> <li>– Dynamic competition between unions for outside resources (for example, school)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Awami League UP Chairman with inclusive local power base</li> <li>– 'Politics of reputation', perhaps stronger than party loyalties</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Weak connection with local politics at union governance level</li> <li>– Strong connection with outside political networks via two rival <i>gustis</i></li> </ul>

(Table 11.2 continued)

(Table 11.2 continued)

Type of Institution	The remote village	The well-connected village	The peri-urban village
Civil society	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– NGOs provide credit and relief services, but not uniformly 'targetted' to poor</li> <li>– Samata collective action moderately successful, active only since 2000</li> <li>– Regular <i>shailish</i>, but increasingly politicized</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– NGOs provide credit widely but tensions exist over repayment</li> <li>– Chairman supports NGO mobilization work to help build his reputation among poor</li> <li>– A progressive local business association operates</li> <li>– Youth association, but becoming politicized by BNP</li> <li>– Chairman has modernized <i>shailish</i> through inclusive strategy, including trying to involve women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Rich associational life in this area</li> <li>– Wide range of credit and social services from NGOs</li> <li>– NGO credit productive due to economic opportunities locally</li> <li>– Positive case of local rickshaw cooperative</li> <li>– Self-help association supports school and cultural events</li> <li>– Higher level of female participation in <i>shailish</i>, perhaps due to wider mobility in peri-urban context</li> <li>– <i>Shailish</i> changing into informal, UP-based model</li> </ul>
Judiciary			
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Declining role of village landowner <i>matbars</i>, new more educated middle class emerging</li> <li>– Growing female education</li> <li>– Out-migration from <i>char</i> to town for labour has broadened social networks and weakened older patronage relations</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Samaj is declining as outside village ties and wider political networks grow</li> <li>– Elites have diversified beyond agriculture (for example, 'NGO-ing')</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Division between two clan factions sometimes generates violence</li> <li>– More relaxed gender norms than other villages</li> <li>– But concerns about youth social problems with drugs and anti-social behaviour</li> </ul>

The power of traditional village leaders—such as *matbars*—is weakening slowly and the roles of local political leaders and union members in *shalish* dispute settlement have increased. The new *gram sarkar* arrangement introduced in 2003 is unpopular, however, and is seen by many people as political interference. Public relief goods and NGO credit were found to be largely non-targetted and were quite uniformly distributed to both rich and poor households. There is still a type of 'net', which captures part, though not all, of outside resources potentially available for elites. In the second, comparatively well-connected village, the strategies of elites to build and maintain power have diversified well beyond agriculture into new activities. These include an active local business association, the building of widespread 'party political' networks and more recently the phenomenon of "NGO-ing"<sup>14</sup>, in which members of elite families set up new organizations that help them to pursue and maintain their position and influence. In this area, a dynamic union Chairman (who was formerly in the Jatiya Party, but is now part of the Awami League) works hard to maintain his power base through a 'politics of reputation' based on building support in his community and creating networks outside. He has revitalized and broadened the *shalish* as an arena for maintaining his popularity by bringing in business people, party people and the new *gram sarkar*.

Tension was also observed between different sections of the elites. For example, the union Chairman is hostile to NGO credit activities since he finds that disputes arising over loan repayments between loanees and the NGO lead to social disharmony and also take up considerable portion of his time. But there may also be constructive competition between unions leading to social progress (two new rival colleges established recently). Interestingly, between NGO mobilization work with landless and the local power structure, there may be 'win-win' pro-poor bargaining opportunities. Also of interest, the same union Chairman was broadly supportive of an NGO *khas* land social mobilization initiative because he saw strengthened land rights for the poor in his area as a potential vote winner. In this village, we found that 'the net' model does not fit well with local realities. Also, key members of the business community here have organized within civil society to maintain relationships and create pressures for change via an active business association known as the *banik samity*. But the association, while active, is increasingly cross-cut by tensions between different sections of the power structure and is also undermined by party activism. In particular, we found that representatives of a new

non-traditional middle class with strong ties to the BNP were challenging traditional elite control of this association.

In the third village, which was peri-urban, internal village *gusti* politics have become strongly enmeshed in wider networks and relationships. This could be observed both through outward-facing *gustis* and strong political party linkages stretching between the village and the outside world. Two rival *gustis* dominate here, and the competition for access to union *parishad* positions involves local leaders in district and centre political relationships. Each *gusti* has formed a link with another powerful family outside the village, connecting them into wider party politics, though both maintain a pragmatic approach to party affiliation. The result is that union-level politics is only weakly articulated with party politics, and allegiances easily change according to convenience. A new BNP union Chairman draws much of his power from his father's reputation as an earlier Chairman and from outside links. Unlike in the second village, NGO credit activities are quite successful in generating economic gains and reducing exploitation of the poor because there are strong town-based economic opportunities, such as rickshaw pulling, which have allowed credit services to be utilized more effectively. Here, loans are used productively and can be repaid more easily.

Tensions are still observed, however, between the union Chairman and a local NGO. These tensions appear to be the result of the NGO's attempted scrutiny of relief distribution transparency rather than criticism of the NGO's economic activities by the union. Less conservative peri-urban social norms, combined with ongoing NGO training of female union members, has created increased gender participation in the *shalish*. Unfortunately, this has not necessarily translated into increased power over dispute settlement outcomes, where it has proved difficult to enforce decisions made in favour of women in disputes over dowry or male violence. Social change is also generating conflict. Social tensions between male youths around the mobility of village women in neighbouring villages led to the union-level formation of a village action committee to protect village interests in the peri-urban village. This has now evolved into a formal, externally funded NGO.<sup>15</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Re-reading BRAC's *The Net* today, one is struck by many of the similarities and continuities between the rural power structure in

the late 1970s and those in 2004. The ways in which the rich are able to use, "... a changing combination of economic and physical power and a system of interlocking networks to gain control over local and external resources ..." (1983: 82) is still highly relevant. The case studies contained in *The Net* outlining the ways in which the rich can combine and convert their power into different forms, such as economic power, physical power and prestige, in order to bribe the police, steal land, or extract money remain familiar. Yet the study's finding that membership of the rural elite was found to be "very stable over the past ten years" and that development resources "rarely reach the poor" (1983: 82–3) does not quite ring true with our 2004 data, or with other recent accounts. Today, there are signs of a less rigid and perhaps more complex rural power structure which could provide, correspondingly, more opportunities and 'room for manoeuvre' for weaker sections of the community to advance their interests and for external agencies such as NGOs to create space for pro-poor change.

The dynamics of rural transformation are changing, becoming more diverse and less predictable. Instead of the rigid power structure observed previously, a higher degree of bargaining and negotiation can be observed, and more social mobility is apparent. Villages have become more integrated into wider institutions and processes, and our existing assumptions of what constitutes categories of 'village', 'town', and 'peri-urban' need to be reconsidered. The concept of 'the net' itself may also need rethinking. In our first village, the net existed but was now weak. Targetted external resources (NGO credit, public flood relief) was provided to the rich and poor alike. In our second and third villages, the net had been replaced by a more flexible 'politics of reputation' in which local leaders seek to build alliances and broker relationships. Village elites these days are engaged not just in capturing external resources coming into the village, but have become active brokers between villages and the wider society and institutions. Internally, they seek to build power bases in the village through pursuing a 'politics of reputation'. Externally, they are active, employing a broad range of strategies for securing and maintaining external relationships such as 'NGO-ing', party political manoeuvring and securing patronage from *upazila* level administration for infrastructure such as schools. The net, if indeed it exists, is also more flexible and open to negotiation than is sometimes recognized. The different scenarios found in our three study villages suggest that outcomes can be diverse. Social change, as Kabeer (2003) argues in

relation to the impact of work by the NGO Nijera Kori, tends to unfold in ways which are both non-linear and multi-directional.

This 'new patronage' has both positive and negative outcomes for the poor. Positive outcomes can include: (a) a broader range of patrons to choose from, (b) wider participation in and new forms of, traditional informal dispute settlement mechanisms (*shalish*), (d) elite support for *khas* land access and other pro-poor initiatives, and (e) the possibility of healthy political competition between local leaders which can secure new infrastructure such as a college. Negative outcomes include: (a) increased vulnerability from failed bargaining positions (for example, unjust arrest or harassment), (b) the tendency to produce only an illusion of change through participation (as in the case of female *shalish* or union members with little or no voice), or (c) the co-option of efforts aimed at bringing about a deeper structural change.

While life for the average rural Bangladeshi remains harsh and insecure, the evidence discussed here suggests a more optimistic picture than that offered by the agrarian structuralist accounts of the 1980s, and less pessimistic than emerging findings from Pakistan (Mohmand, this volume). There are signs of a revitalization of local democracy within decentralizing political structures which, while further linking local institutions with central power and national level politics in ways that may yet prove problematic, may also be opening up new local political spaces and room for manoeuvre for marginalized groups. For example, the recent efforts at strengthening union *parishads* can produce positive results in terms of wider local political participation, although these may be time-consuming, costly, and often difficult to build on or extend. The work of NGOs, both at the level of credit services and social mobilization can also contribute to positive change, but such efforts will need to be viewed in the light of the ways in which NGOs also form a part of the power structure that they seek to influence.<sup>16</sup>

## NOTES

1. The role of the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida) in funding this research is gratefully acknowledged. The authors would like to thank Johan Norqvist, Anne Bruzelius, Harunur Rashid Bhuiyan, Farzana Sultana, Arshad Siddiqui, Mohammed Manirul Islam Khan, Abdur Rahman Liton, Tania Shanaj, Robert Törlind, Marja Ruohomäki, Reazul Islam and Rehana Khan for their contributions to or comments on the original study. We also thank David Gellner for his help and advice in linking the study with the present publication.

2. The study on which this chapter draws was based on fieldwork undertaken in three contrasting areas of Faridpur and Rajbari Districts: (a) a remote, flood-prone village located in a *char* area with poor infrastructure; (b) a second village that has relatively good infrastructure, diversified agriculture, and a more dynamic economy with a thriving *bazar*; and (c) a village in a peri-urban setting, near Faridpur town. In each of the three locations, following a preliminary mapping exercise, four focus groups were convened that were disaggregated by gender and wealth: non-poor men, non-poor women, poor men and poor women. A themed, semi-structured discussion schedule was used, covering perceptions of and experiences with the local power structure. Data from these 12 focus groups was then further explored through semi-structured interviews with key informants to construct brief case studies illustrating issues of interest to the study. The findings are summarized in Table 11.2.
3. The concept of 'elites' is informed by the work of Mills (1956), who coined the term 'power elite' to denote people at the top of the major institutional hierarchies of a society, whose shared interests produce a clique that influences major decisions and helps maintain social hierarchies.
4. Lukes (2005 [1974]) distinguished power—the ability of its holders to exact compliance or obedience from other individuals—from authority, which he saw as an attribute of social organization (for example, a family, corporation, or government) based on recognition of superior competence. Lukes famously developed a 'three dimensional' concept of power. This takes into account not only the use of coercion in which one person can get another to do what s/he 'does not want to do', but also the more subtle and indirect ways in which power operates by preventing certain courses of action being considered, certain options ever being placed on the agenda, or affecting people's conceptions of particular issues.
5. Many researchers have been influenced by Foucault's (1980) challenge to the 'binary' view of power (one of domination and resistance) that shows the ways in which power is instead multi-dimensional, strategic and bound up in constant processes of discipline and persuasion, which maintains the positioning of those with and without power.
6. Imran Matin and Naomi Hossain, BRAC, personal communication, July 2004.
7. Bode shows that a crucial aspect of understanding the power structure is recognition of the 'blurred boundaries' (2002: 6) between formal and informal institutions and relationships, since power is often exercised simultaneously through informal practices within formal structures.
8. The union elections in 2003 brought some changes to the rural power structure. PPRC (2003a) reviewed the new rural leaders based on a pre-election round table meeting and post-election survey of elected chairmen in 533 unions. These leaders were almost all found to be party-affiliated, mostly aged 40–41, and just under half (42 per cent) were new faces. There has long been a relatively high turnover of elected officials at the local level, perhaps suggesting that voters can to a degree discipline unpopular leaders, as Crook and Manor (1998) show for the 1990 *upazila* chair elections. Influence, wealth and honesty were most highly rated virtues, even above leadership qualities. The study found that the average spending of those elected was Tk. 6.8 lakhs, more than had been seen in previous elections. Faridpur is listed as one of the areas with higher than average levels of violence during the campaign. In 2003, the election produced 22 women union chairpersons, a small increase over the 20 women elected in 1997.

9. There have been several important donor-funded initiatives that have attempted to strengthen the union *parishads*. For example, Langbakk and Ahmed (2003) reviewed the Local Capacity Development Initiative (LCDI) pilot project in Greater Faridpur for Sida (Swedish International Development Agency). This project was found to have successfully strengthened union *parishads* using a combination of demand creation and awareness raising among local citizens, and the provision of funds for schemes directly to unions, thereby building a clearer role, greater respect and improved transparency for these local institutions. Other initiatives include a United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF) project in Sirajganj, NW Bangladesh which 'aims to promote decentralized participatory planning and local governance' by decentralizing funds directly to union *parishads* via the provision of annual block grants and by promoting local infrastructure and services through participatory means, and CARE's 'UPs working to achieve real development' project, known as 'UPWARD'. This was piloted in nine unions as an attempt to strengthen union *parishads*, using awareness raising, training, workshops, exposure visits, social mapping, and development planning methods (Slater and Preston 2003).
10. In a survey of local disputes and conflicts, A.Hossain (2003) found that only around 6 per cent were dealt with in village courts; the vast majority went to the *shalish*.
11. Some sections of the NGO community in Bangladesh have recently been through a period of political tension with the current Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) government, after accusations that certain NGOs—the largest and best-known being Proshika—had crossed over the line of non-partisan' politics into tacit support for the Awami League during the 2002 election campaign period. One consequence of this has been the sidelining of the existing NGO umbrella organization, known as the Association of Development NGOs in Bangladesh (ADAB). A new NGO umbrella organization has been established, with government support, called the Federation of NGOs in Bangladesh (FNB). FNB has introduced a membership screening process designed to keep out those NGOs identified by the government as 'party political'.
12. Recent writing on 'empowerment' is also relevant to the discussion of how agencies, groups, and individuals can bring about changes to the *status quo*, or face resistance to such changes. In particular, the distinction between 'power over' and 'power to' made by Rowlands (1995) is useful because it separates out the kind of power that allows one person or group to dominate another, from the kind of power that allows a person or group to challenge and change their situation. While some writers on rural communities and village life have emphasized notions of community, solidarity and harmony, the concept of power has led others to emphasize social inequality and disharmony.
13. Gramsci's (1988) analysis of power emphasized its influence as a totalizing force—'hegemony'—which allowed the state and/or a popular majority to dominate society through a pervasive institutional power, repressing those citizens holding alternative or contrary opinions about state actions. This has led some researchers to focus on civil society, social movements, and other forms of collective action or resistance.
14. This term is used by Hilhorst (2003) to describe the strategy of attempting to build and diversify an elite power base by setting up an NGO as a vehicle for

pursuing individual and community interests.

15. Self-help and philanthropic initiatives in all three villages normally follow this organizational path.
16. The idea that NGOs can represent an 'oppositional' force to the power structure which might be gained from a reading of Gramsci's concept of power (1988) may in some cases be true, but our data suggests that such a view ignores important aspects of the embeddedness of most organizations in the local and national power structure.

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