

The Role of Ward Shava in Ensuring Democratic Decentralization in Bangladesh

Md. Abujafar Ripon¹

ABSTRACT

The local governance structure in Bangladesh has been going through significant changes recently. Government institutions and international development organisations are working collaboratively to establish democratic decentralisation through introducing different participatory avenues for citizens in Local Government (LG) activities. Among them, Ward Shava (WS) is thought to be crucial to establishing a bridge between citizens and local government representatives. This study examined the role of Ward Shava in ensuring democratic decentralisation in Bangladesh and identified the challenges faced by the local representatives in running Ward Shava. This study followed a cross-sectional approach and a qualitative inquiry method. A total of 24 Key Informant Interviews from local government officials and representatives, 30 In-depth interviews from citizens and 4 Focus Group Discussions from different community groups were conducted purposively. Results showed that Ward Shava is performing well with its limited capacity to ensure the accountability of local representatives. It also creates a space for placing public demand and resolving internal disputes among people. However, local government officials face numerous challenges to regularise Ward Shava proceedings because of a scarcity of human and financial resources, partisan politics, and a corrupted rural power structure. Still, every respondent agreed that there is a vast scope for Ward Shava in ensuring democratic decentralisation in Bangladesh.

Keywords: Democratic decentralisation; Ward Shava; People's participation; Accountability; Local government; Local representatives.

INTRODUCTION

Democratic decentralisation is an essential mechanism to establish an effective Local Government system by empowering local representatives and making them accountable to the citizens (Panday 2011). It also ensures people's participation, meets the citizen's demand, ensures quality services, accountability, equity, and promotes local development, which enticed the governments, international institutions, and non-

1. Md. Abujafar Ripon, Deputy Secretary, Local Government Division,
Email: ripou.abujafar27@gmail.com

governmental organisations to transfer public power for increasing people's participation in decision-making towards local governments (Geschiere & Boone 2003; Ribot 2007; Panday 2011). In 1999, among the 126 countries of the world, 96 enforced democratic decentralisation in their administrative system, and in 1997, fiscal decentralisation was included in 52 countries. The democratic decentralisation is highest in the Americas and Western Europe by 100%, while in East Asia, it is lowest by less than 60% (UNDP 2002). Throughout the world, democratic decentralisation is being implemented in countries like Australia, Germany, Canada, the Philippines, Indonesia, Uganda, Ukraine by transferring discretionary powers to local authorities to manage and make decisions on the livelihood of local people, forestry, and resources. The World Bank Community Driven Development (CDD) and Community Based Natural Resource Management (CBNRM) are also facilitating to enhance the local people's participation in local issues (Ribot et al. 2010).

Following the World Bank, several international donors also focused on decentralisation as a reform in governance in the developing countries (Gadenne & Singhal 2014; Fedelino & Ter-Minassian 2009; Habitat 2009). Since then, democratic decentralisation has been gaining much popularity, and in 1999 World Bank estimated that more than 80% of the world's developing countries were experiencing decentralisation at that time (Rao et al. 2015). Decentralisation is considered favourable for the developing countries due to the heterogeneity and diversity in these countries and the local policy maker's advantages on the information. It may also reduce the high corruption cost of \$1.26 trillion in developing countries (WEF 2019). However, decentralisation is less in developing countries compared to developed countries. Weak political and administrative structure, insufficient policies on national services delivery, poor central and local capacity, limitations in funding and resources, intention to depend on a central authority, and lower people's demands make decentralisation difficult in developing countries (Smoke 2006).

In Bangladesh, decentralisation was inherited from British India's local government system (Rashid 2004). There is also the provision in our Constitutional Article 59 for decentralisation, for transferring public power to the elected representative bodies of all tiers of the Local government system (Uddin 2019). Decentralisation policies have been changed several times in Bangladesh, but due to the elitist and detached disposition of local government administration, the grassroots people's active participation in LG activities was not ensured (Panday 2011). In 2009, the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 was taken so that the Union Parishads at the grassroots level may get some direct participatory avenues where the local citizens can participate in taking decisions directly along with the indirect participatory mechanisms like local elections (Uddin 2019).

Through the Local Government (Union Parishad) Act, 2009, some formal mechanisms, including Village Standing Committees, Ward Shava, Open Budgeting

System, Village Court, Union Digital Centre, were introduced at the Union Parishad level to increase citizen's participation in the local government (LG Act 2009). Among these avenues, Ward Shava is considered a more effective and newer dimension to ensure democratic decentralisation by increasing people's participation in local decision-making and budgeting. The UP-Governance Project (UPGP) under UNDP-UNCDF Bangladesh, in cooperation with LGD in Bangladesh, also ensures decentralisation through Ward Shava at the local level (UNDP 2015). The provision in the 2009 act regarding Ward Shava allows the citizen to express their demand with recommendations for financial, information and developmental activities (Ahmed et al. 2016). Despite the initiatives, a satisfactory degree of participation of people at the local level is still a question where WS may be a platform to outperform the voice of grassroots people to their needs, demands, and opinions in the local development planning and resource planning processes. The central concern of this study is to examine the role of Ward Shava in ensuring democratic decentralisation in Bangladesh. Efforts have also been made to identify the challenges faced by the local representatives while running Ward Shava.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decentralisation can promote democratic participation by making political institutions more transparent and instilling more robust citizen support for the government. Given the immense unhappiness with democracy among many people in developing countries worldwide, it has become abundantly clear that democratic consolidation requires citizens to have a stake in their government (UPGP 2016). Larson and Ribot (2004) stated that decentralisation gives citizens a more profound interest in democracy's success since it allows for more public involvement in sub-national government (Larson & Ribot 2004). Along with this, Bergh (2004) defined democratic decentralisation as the establishment of reciprocal links between central and local governments and between local governments and citizens. It comprises policy-making authority, the spread of democratic processes to lower levels of government, and efforts to maintain democracy's long-term viability (Crook & Manor 2018). Blair (2000) conducted a study that explained that both decentralisation and democratic local governance are part of democratic decentralisation. Blair described democratic decentralisation as substantial authority transferred to local units of administration that are transparent and accountable to the local populace, who possess full democratic rights and liberties.

Several studies also found significant findings of local avenues to promote democratic decentralisation in developed countries, including political representatives becoming closer to residents, which allows for better resource allocation and distribution at the local level. Furthermore, these studies revealed that these local avenues focus on providing better chances for grassroots people to engage in decision-making, resulting in more dynamic, innovative, and responsive local programs (Bergh 2004; Rondinelli et al. 1983). Denhardt et al. (2009) and Holzer & Kloby (2005) said that people's engagement in decision-making and development projects that impact their lives is seen as a tool of

decentralisation since it empowers local people to speak up about government decisions.

Like that of other developing countries, Bangladesh government is attempting to improve democratic decentralisation procedures and reforms in local governmental functions through citizen participation (Siddiqui 2005). The Bangladeshi Local Government (Union Parishad) Act 2009 assures that local people and elected representatives are included in several local avenues, including the Standing Committee, Ward Shava, Open Budget, Village Court, and Union Digital Centre, to increase people participation in local decisions. These avenues are thought to be the most effective way for Bangladesh to foster democratic decentralisation at the grassroots level. Participatory budgeting, for example, is a procedure in which citizens can influence the allocation of public resources through a local government viewpoint that considers sectoral concerns. This open budget allows citizens to voice their concerns, participate in decision-making and development initiatives, and hold the council accountable for its actions (Chowdhury 2018).

Additionally, Islam (2015) conducted a study and found that among the participatory avenues, Village Court is a dynamic process through which disputants can discuss their difficulties freely and without fear of retaliation to establish an amicable and long-term resolution, assisting in the restoration of damaged relationships. There is no legal basis for making an arbitrary decision, even though there is no legitimate justification for village leaders interfering in the decision-making process (Islam 2015). In addition to this, Uddin (2019) supported this statement and added that due to overburdening cases and poor people's lack of access to the official justice system, the village court is the best option for locals to obtain justice at a low cost and in a pleasant and informal atmosphere. On the other hand, the UP-Standing committees assist in planning and monitoring service provider's activities and implementation processes, providing feedback to the general public based on their requirements and demands (IMED 2019). There is a provision for gaining a co-opted member from the local arena for democratic decentralisation. The decision is based on most of the attendee's viewpoints (Uddin 2019; Barnett et al. 1997).

Moreover, Uddin (2019) mentions that Ward Shava effectively enables people to share their opinions and ideas concerning local activities. It guarantees that people are involved in the policy development process and that local officials account for them. Ward Shava meetings were created as a venue for the unheard voices of the poor, particularly rural women, to give them a voice to bring their problems to the attention of the local government. They now have a pathway to provide information and comments on community issues at the meeting (Uddin 2019). In addition to this, Hussain and Rahman (2014) conducted a study and said that public hearings are commonly used to discuss available budgets. This process is perceived as a vital instrument for bringing people's problems to the attention of elected politicians and street-level bureaucrats, as well as offering valuable feedback to officials on people's experiences and perspectives to create an environment participatory decision-making process (Hussain & Rahman 2014). However, the above literature has found a strong correlation between democratic decentralisation and local avenues. Public participation is a prerequisite of democratic decentralisation where local avenues ensure participation at the grassroots level for

decision-making. The hypothesis can be drawn that Ward Shava is perceived as an essential local avenue to ensure democratic decentralisation at the local level.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher followed a cross-sectional research design to have a quick snapshot of the study problem. A qualitative approach was employed to gain a more insightful interpretation of Ward Shava in ensuring democratic decentralisation in Bangladesh and the challenges faced by the local representative of Ward Shava of the selected Union Parishad. The current study data were obtained from the primary source of data. Primary data were collected through Key Informant Interviews (KII), In-depth Interviews (IDI), and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) by following the purposive sampling method. Twenty-four KIIs were conducted to collect data from the UP Chairmen (4), Members (12), Female members (4), and UNOs (4) of the selected areas by using Interview protocol. The participants' opinions helped the researcher know the actual scenario of the locality and find out the study problems easily. Besides this, 30 IDIs were conducted to collect data from the citizens, and 4 FGD were conducted with citizens, officials and elected representatives of the four UPs to meet the study purpose. The study area was chosen from four UP, namely Bhadai, Joyag, Panchashar, and Shingrail, under four divisions of Bangladesh by using a purposive sampling method from December 15, 2019, to February 15, 2020.

To analyse the interviews, data were analysed based on the statements of UP chairmen, members, female members and UNOs of the Upazila Parishad (UZP). A coding mechanism was created to keep the same answers under the same category. Later, the study attempted to use those categories to finalise the research paper's better and more valuable statements. On the other hand, Secondary data were collected through document analysis from various sources, including books, articles, journals, newspapers, and relevant government reports. This method explained the qualitative data in a regulated procedure that enabled the researcher to identify the central theme of the research paper. This study triangulated different methods in data collection that enabled the researcher to collect qualitative data about the research questions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The decentralisation approach of the government has provided access to previously neglected areas and local populations at the grassroot level by creating an avenue for them. In this study, the researcher focused on Ward Shava as a participatory avenue to ensure decentralisation at the local level and identified its challenges faced by the local representatives. This study was conducted in 4 unions, namely Bhadai, Joyag, Panchashar, and Shingrail. Primarily the study explored that Ward Shava helped the local people express their opinion independently in their respective area, and these root level people also get citizen right by this participatory institution. One of the participants opined:

I had no right to give any opinion in local administration, but after establishing the Ward Shava, I got the opportunity to share my voice as well as my opinion in my union (IDI 4, Personal Communication, January 2, 2021).

Besides this opinion, the researcher observed another interesting finding: there had been significant changes in citizen's demand and right to the Union Parishad and after establishing the Ward Shava. Now, local people can actively take the fundamental citizen's right to participate in the local development program. These changes make a positive impact on local socio-economic and political development. This study also explained that this institution forces elected representatives to ensure the grassroots level people's accountability and gives political sustainability in the unions. One exciting aspect of these findings is that people can raise questions to the elected members related to their interest and benefit of the local areas. In this point of view, one respondent expressed:

I did not know about my right and my duties before, when the government introduced this avenue, I got my right as a citizen and shared my thought with the local representative about me and my respective areas (IDI 2, Personal Communication, January 4, 2021).

The current study also shows that accountability of the elected people, transparency of the local level members, and duties of the root level people significantly increased due to the proper implementation of the Ward Shava. Bottom-up accountability strengthens the local administration, and participation of root level people empowers the service providing capacity of the Ward Shava at the local level. To support the above argument, one representative mentioned:

I assume that through WS meetings, the marginalised people could share opinions and decisions in the forum and asked queries to the local leaders better than any other system of local government. (KII 2, Personal Communication, January 3, 2021)

While the government has put in place a highly effective system to hold local representatives accountable to the people, bottom-up accountability can only be achieved if the local government is constituted as an autonomous institution. In this regard, another participant said:

I believe that for the first time, the local government statute made WS a necessary event where both people and their officials may be present on the same platform (IDI 1, Personal Communication, January 5, 2021).

By analysing the participant's answers, it is explored that WS is considered an inevitable tool for creating opportunities to place people's demands. One member of the UP said,

I expect that if WS are arranged regularly, it could create opportunity for local people to place their demands (KII 1, Personal Communication, January 2, 2021).

At the same time, the study says that it could be a vital mechanism for knowing local people's grievances, and the majority of the participants of this study agreed with this statement as the participation of 5% of the voters is made necessary for the organisation

of a meeting with the Ward Shava Representatives (Chowdhury 2017). Relating the above study, one member of WS opined:

Participants were invited to place their demands about different issues like roads and infrastructure, education, health, sanitation, and agriculture (KII 3, Personal Communication, January 3, 2021).

The study also explored that decentralisation increased participation and the ability of local governments to exert pressure on the central government by allocating a substantial number of resources to local development. By analysing the collected Interviews, the researcher explored that WS can solve local problems with the participation of mass people in the decision-making process. A UNO said:

WS meetings could maintain village law and order situations, making social safety net beneficiaries lists, stopping child marriages and dowry systems, stopping drugs and women violence, dispute of land problems, local quarrelling, local theft and robbery, couple problems were mainly resolved by the WS (KII 10, Personal Communication, January 2, 2021).

One citizen suggested:

I think, if there were a provision to sit with different wards among different unions, it might provide solutions to mitigate the problems within different union's issues more easily. (IDI 10, Personal Communication, January 7, 2021)

Two WS meetings are generally conducted per year, and the people are interested in participating in these meetings eagerly. However, this result finds out that most of the time, the citizens face frustration due to WS's inability to mitigate their unavailability of updated information. In this case, the NGOs can also come forward to help the citizens and WS. In some cases, UPs are confused about the role and objectives of WS, whereas they organise them entirely by the demand of NGOs. In this study, a UNO interestingly pointed out about the engagement of NGOs and said:

Due to the continuous demand of an NGO, the UP organised the WS where the concerned Ward Member was unwilling to join. The member joined the meeting after the NGO official had requested him over the phone (KII 5, Personal Communication, January 2, 2021).

The findings admitted that the technical and administrative ability of the local organisation is improved as a result of the Ward Sava, which established planned growth in local administrative and political culture. Besides, the national development strategy considers as the key player of the union's regional and local economic and cultural development plans.

Challenges Faced By Local Representatives In Running Ward Shava At The Local Level

The people's participation in local government has not yet fulfilled the legislative provisions and citizen's expectations. Knowledge and understanding of Ward Shava are very much limited among the rural people and local representatives. Though a few local representatives try to avoid Ward Shava because they do not want to be accountable for their work, most local representatives cannot regularise Ward Shava meetings for some

genuine issues. Massive functions and responsibilities have been introduced in the 6 and 7 clauses of the UP Act 2009 for Ward Shava without denoting proper guidelines (Ahmed et al. 2016). Ward Shava has almost all the responsibilities same of Union Parishad. There is no institutional setup for holding the meetings of Ward Shava. One of the UP members said:

As there are no specific rules and regulations about the inviting processes, we invite people in the WS according to our will. However, this is not always effective enough to bring the local people in the meeting (KII 7, Personal Communication, January 8, 2021).

The Union Parishads are suffering from a shortage of workforce and inadequate financial allocation. There is only one secretary responsible for doing almost all official duties of the Union Parishad (Panday 2019). UP chairmen do not prefer to attend WS meetings because they cannot fulfil citizen's demands due to the meagre budget. One female UP member informed that:

I have invited a total of 4 WS meetings in last 4 years in my Ward with the financial assistance of UP chairman. However, it could not cover all residential areas for financial limitation and communication problems (KII 8, Personal Communication, January 8, 2021).

The patron-client relationship is badly affecting the local governance system in Bangladesh. Without maintaining good relation with MP, it becomes difficult for the UP chairman to run a UP properly (Chowdhury 2017). The patrons (MPs) control the activities of their clients (UP chairmen and members), and there is limited scope for making bottom-up planning (from UPs to central government) (Roy & Biswas 2020). One of the respondents said:

UP members do not care anybody, and they are accountable only to the patrons rather than the citizens (IDI 7, Personal Communication, January 8, 2021).

Sometimes the patron-client relationship between MPs and UPs prevents holding Ward Shava meetings as the people's voice would question their deeds. Bangladesh election commission has introduced partisan politics at the union level for the last two elections since 2015. Moreover, most of the UP chairmen are from the ruling political party. However, the ward members can participate in elections without party symbols at the ward level. The ward members from other parties do not get proper allocations (Buchmann 2013). Even the voters who are not supporters of the ruling party are deprived of government allocations despite being the proper person for getting government help. One of the UP chairmen opined:

The MPs allow sufficient resources only to those UP chairmen who are elected from the ruling parties. If any UP chairman comes from a different party, they become deprived in many ways (KII 4, Personal Communication, January 3, 2021).

This study also looked at the negative aspects, such as how local elites became the driving force behind the plan and played a disproportionate role in planning and management projects. Other challenges are the weak relationship between central and local government administration. Corruption, clientelism, and political alienation are

all inevitable by-products of insensitive, inefficient, and inflexible bureaucracies due to their size, which hampers the implementation of decentralisation. The failure of central government policy also impedes decentralisation at the grassroots level.

CONCLUSION

Yieldings of democratic decentralisation are now very much evident in the rural areas of Bangladesh. Changes in governance style, the introduction of technology in service delivery and participatory avenues contribute to quality service delivery at the doorstep of rural people. Rural people are now actively participating in different local development works which is one of the main propositions of democratic decentralization. Ward Shava holds public officials & elected members accountable, creates space for placing citizen's demand, seeks the remedy of local problems, and plans for the locality's sustainable development. However, scarcity of financial and human resources, partisan politics, weak policy infrastructure and lack of awareness and education are hampering the natural workflow of Ward Shava. The study recommends several steps to recover from the present situation. Ministry of Local Government, Rural Development, and Co-operatives should create a unified checklist for Ward Shava to guide performing specific functions and recruiting workforce for its smooth operation. The Ministry of finance should increase the financial allocation for Ward Shava, considering the demand for open budgeting. Besides, Election Commission should give a second thought about the partisan election system at Union Parishads. Proper implementation of these suggestions can make Ward Shava work more effectively and decentralise more authority to the citizens for ensuring democratic decentralisation in the local government system of Bangladesh.

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