

Postscript

This monograph is an ambitious attempt to analyse the entire history of an ancient land within a rigorous conceptual framework. An inherent weakness of such sweeping presentation is that it tends to neglect details. On the contrary, too much details distract the attention of readers from the main themes of the study. In retrospect, it appears that terse presentation in this book has led in some places to misreadings, and doubts. This postscript addresses some of the questions raised by the readers and reviewers since the publication of this monograph in 1996.

One of the main themes of the book is that villages in much of South Asia were typically "corporate" whereas most rural settlements in the Bangladesh region were "open". Three questions have been raised about this hypothesis.

First, it has been argued that the differences between typical villages in Bangladesh and those in the rest of the subcontinent have been overstated in this study. Since the concept of self-sufficient village community has been debunked in recent anthropological studies, the proponents of this view maintain that the villages in the rest of the South Asia, which are not homogeneous, cannot be clearly differentiated from those of the Bangladesh region. This study also concluded that the so-called village communities were exceptional and existed only in certain parts of north and south India. This is why, the paradigm of 'corporate' and 'open' village was used in this study in place of "self-sufficient village community". It was assumed that the exceptional village community was the purest form of corporate village. However, "corporateness" and "openness" are qualitative concepts. It will be unrealistic to postulate that all corporate villages are alike. Even the exceptional village communities were not homogenous; they were subdivided into *raiya*tvari, *pattidari*, and *bhaiachara* villages. The degree of corporateness, therefore, varied among corporate villages. This does

not necessarily mean that all villages which did not correspond to the ideal of a typical village community was not at all a corporate village. For example, a reviewer observed, "it follows that in other parts of north and south India a certain lack of corporateness (and hence the possibility of open village) was not to be ruled out. Lack of corporateness, therefore cannot be seen as an exclusive proposition for Bengal, or for that matter eastern Bengal" (Sen 2000, p. 144). Such observations are based on a total misunderstanding of the methodology of this study. Following Max Weber, the concepts of "corporate" and "open" villages are used as ideal types (see p.44). The ideal types may not always exist in pure form. It was concluded that most villages in Bangladesh corresponded to the ideal of "open village", though the degree of corporateness in "corporate villages" in the rest of South Asia varied. These differences may not be evident to outsiders and may not be always measured in quantitative terms. They, however, could be easily perceived by the administrators who governed those villages, anthropologists who lived in those villages, and social scientists employing Max Weber's methodology including *Verstehen*.

Secondly, it has been contended that this study ignores important regional variations among the villages in areas that now constitute Bangladesh. Obviously, there were regional variations among such villages in respect of tenurial relations or agricultural practices etc. However, the most significant proxy for the corporateness of a village is its physical layout. The overwhelming majority of villages in Bangladesh were linear and dispersed settlements except small pockets in Barind area in Nawabganj and Natore districts (Baqui, 1998). Thus the regional variations among the villages in respect of land tenure etc. are irrelevant for the main themes of this study.

Finally, it has been argued that the differences between the villages in West Bengal and Bangladesh region are fuzzy because both the regions contained a mixture of nucleated and linear-dispersed settlements. It is true that all villages in West Bengal region were not nucleated. However, the reports of the early British administrators, Settlement reports and anthropological studies clearly suggest that most of villages in Bangladesh region were linear and dispersed whereas the share of nucleated villages in West Bengal was high. These are however, generalizations based on statistical behaviour which may not be valid in all cases.

A lot of questions have been raised about the role of village officials in the Bangladesh region. At page 40, it was stated: "The system of employing village officials did not exist at all in the region. The posts of Patwari or village accountant are unknown here". The term village officials in this para refers to officials employed by the village and not officials stationed at the village by outside authority. The institution of village accountant in Bangladesh did not exist in this traditional sense, though there were obviously accountants who kept records of revenue. They were not, however, employees of village. In ancient Bengal, the functions of the village accountant were performed by the office of Pustapala which consisted of two or three officials who were appointed by the State (Roy, 1400 B.S., p. 324). However, in some large villages, revenue records were maintained by an official designated as Patradasa (Roy, 1400 B.S., p. 325). It is not, however, clear as to who appointed and paid the Patradasa and what was the relationship of Patradasa and Pustapala. The epigraphic evidence clearly suggests that the office of Patradasa was confined to large villages only. Furthermore, the office of Pustapala which employed more than one official served a number of villages rather than a single village. Obviously, the Pustapala was not a village official in the traditional sense. As the overwhelming majority of villages in the Bangladesh region is small, it is very likely that in the ancient period Pustapala acting on behalf of the central government maintained revenue records in the Bangladesh region.

The office of village accountant was designated as Patwari during the Muslim rule. However, the role of Patwari varied according to tenurial relations. Broadly speaking, there were two types of villages in South Asia: peasant-held (raiya) village and zamindar-held (taaluqa) village. In the raiya villages, the Patwari as an employee of the village used to protect the rights of the villagers. In zamindari villages, the village accountant or Patwari was a creature of landlord; in most cases paid by him and invariably controlled by him. In many zamindari villages, the functions of the Patwari were appropriated by the gomastas (employees of the zamindars). In many villages in Bangladesh region, the Patwaris or village accountants were outsiders and often they maintained accounts of more than one village. The uniqueness of the institution of village accountant in Lower Bengal became evident when the British rulers undertook the

experiment of introducing the Qanungo and Patwari system by Regulation XII of 1817. In a letter of the Board of Revenue dated 2nd June, 1819, it was observed that the Governor General-in-Council is "sensible of the difficulties which are likely to attend the introduction of the Regulation in Bengal compared with the provinces in which the village communities are entire" (GOB, 1817-19, pp. 165-166). It clearly indicates that as early as 1819, the Government of India noted the fact that the institution of Patwari in the traditional form did not function in Bangladesh region where the village community in its "entire form" did not exist. Furthermore, R. Chamberlain in his report dated 18th April, 1819 stated as follows on the Patwari system: "In the western provinces including Benaras and Behar, the expenses of the Patwaree more generally falls on the Ryots ... In Bengal or in those Districts in which I have had opportunities of making enquiry the Patwaree appeared to be paid by the landholders almost generally" (GOB, 1817-19, pp. 114-115). Incidentally, it may be noted here that a reviewer using the same records tried to argue that the Patwari in the traditional sense existed in Bangladesh region (Sen, 2000, pp. 146-150). This analysis, however, suffers from two major weaknesses. First, the reports of Bihar region (which were sent by the Government of Bengal to Collector of Mymensingh) were confused as records originating in Bangladesh region. Secondly, the paragraphs which dealt with the uniqueness of the Patwari in Bangladesh region were altogether ignored. However, two conclusions seem to be inescapable from an analysis of these records of early British administrators. First, the institution of Patwari was stronger in Bihar and western provinces where corporate villages existed compared to village accountants in Lower Bengal. Secondly, the village accountant in Lower Bengal was generally (except small exceptions) paid by the Zamindars whereas the Patwari in other areas was paid by the villagers themselves.

A question has been raised whether the description of the British administrators about the revenue administration in Bangladesh region is valid about the realities in Pre-British Bengal. A recent study has contended that the village in Pre-British Bengal "was not simply an administrative tier but constituted instead a distinct level of polity counterpoised to the level of zamindari authority, ... the village was not only the basic unit of revenue-payment, but it was

also the basic unit of revenue -assessment" (Rahman, 1986, p. 82). There are several major weaknesses of this hypothesis.

The proponents of this hypothesis do not furnish any documentary evidence that land revenue in the Bangladesh region was generally paid by the village as a corporate entity. Their conclusion is based on indirect evidence. From an analysis of the villages in the rest of South Asia, two characteristics of villages responsible for revenue payment could be identified. First, the villages which acted as the basic unit of revenue payment had a "financial pool into which everybody paid and from which the village representatives satisfied the revenue demand". (Habib, 1985 p. 135). Available evidence does not support the existence of such financial pools in Bangladesh villages. Secondly, there used to be clearly identifiable persons who were responsible for the collection of revenue. In north Indian villages, such persons were criminally prosecuted if they failed to collect revenue (Habib, 1985, p. 313). No such system is reported to have existed in the Bangladesh region. Furthermore, the revenue collectors in the village whether a headman or a Chaudhury were traditionally entitled to a share of the revenue or to a degree of revenue exemption. However, no such system was clearly established in Bengal.

The zamindari system was firmly entrenched in Bengal long before the establishment of the British rule in 1757. It is, therefore, difficult to understand as to why there would be radical change in the process of assessment and collection of revenue from the cultivators in the early years of the British rule. *Apriori*, it seems that it would be more profitable for the zamindars to keep the power of assessment to themselves rather than sharing this power with the villagers. According to Habib (1985, p. 156), a zamindar in Bengal used to pay fixed rent to the King whereas he used to fix the rent of the cultivators except where revenue was fixed by custom. An analysis of the available evidence does not support the hypothesis that the village was the normal unit of revenue assessment. However, in sparsely populated areas or difficult terrains, it may be cost-effective to share revenue assessment with the villagers. But such instances are likely to be exceptions and not the general rule. In this connection, Paterson's preliminary report of Baldakhal Pargana in Comilla deserves special mention. Paterson wrote in 1887: "The Board may judge from the circumstances what a seem (seam?) of

confusion this country exhibits: The Pottahs which are granted to the Rieots in Buldacaal are nothing more than a Declaration in General terms under the seal of the Zamindar or Amil of the Rate of Assessment per Cunnie according to the quantity of land that the Rieots may be afterward capable of cultivating without expressing the quantity which the Ruitt undertakes to occupy or the amount for which he is answerable. One of these Pottas often serves a whole village but a Ruitt of (if ?) he chuses may have a separate pottah for himself which only differs from the other being addressed to him" (Islam, 2000, p. 218). Paterson's report clearly suggests that in Baldakhal Pargana of Comilla district the cultivators could opt to pay the revenue individually or jointly. Furthermore, the rate of assessment per acre was fixed by the revenue officials. Thus the problem of apportioning the demand on the whole village among the cultivators did not at all rise. The villages described by Paterson are a far cry from corporate entities.

The relationship between grass-roots institutions and Islamic proselytization as enunciated in Chapter IV has also been misunderstood. For example, a reviewer observed: "It is strongly asserted by the author that the easy spread of Islam in Bengal was mainly due to the absence of strong grass-root institutions. He argues, that the spread of Islam in other parts of South Asia was limited because of the presence of the strong village community. But does it mean that Pakistan where Islam spread well too lacked strong village community?" (Islam, 1997, p. 339). This is, however, a wrong interpretation of this monograph's explanation about the relative success of Islam in Bengal. According to this study, there were two types of conversion to Islam in South Asia: (1) conversion from below, and (2) conversion from above. Conversion from below was possible where grass-roots institutions were weak. In areas with strong corporate institutions, the initiative for conversion came from above. It was clearly stated at page 112 that conversion from above may be initiated by a King or leadership of a tribe, caste group, professional guild or village community. However, in most cases corporate village leadership was actively opposed to conversion to an alien faith. The explanation for Muslim preponderance in areas which now constitute Pakistan was, therefore, explained in this study in the following manner: "Obviously in the Punjab, Sind and NWFP there were strong tribal organizations among the Muslims. It is,

therefore, likely that many of such tribes had group conversions to Islam" (see p. 112).

Questions have also been raised about the relationship of the main themes of this study and the burgeoning "social capital" literature. Though the term "social capital" was coined as early as 1916 and was conceptualized in the 1970s and the 1980s by economist Glen Loury and sociologists Evan Light and James Coleman (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 19), it was really popularized in the 1990s by Robert Putnam and his colleagues. The term social capital was defined by Putnam in the following manner: "Social Capital ... refers to features of social organization such as trust, norms and networks that can improve the efficiency of society by facilitating coordinated actions" (Putnam, 1993). According to Francis Fukuyama, "Social Capital can be defined simply as a part of informal rules or norms shared among members of a group that permits cooperation among them" (Fukuyama, 1999, p. 16).

Though the term "social capital" was not explicitly used in this study and the underlying theory of "*Discovery of Bangladesh*" was developed totally independent of social capital theory, the theoretical underpinnings of social capital theory and the present study are derived from the same economic literature. In fact, there is striking similarity between the themes of Putnam's "*Making Democracy Work*" and "*Discovery of Bangladesh*". It was postulated in this study that despite ethnic, linguistic and cultural unity in Greater Bengal, historical developments in eastern and western regions in Bengal diverged significantly owing to differences in institutions at the grass-roots level. It was argued that rural settlements in Eastern Bengal were characterized by "isolation paradox" which impeded spontaneous cooperation at the lowest level. Putnam also showed that historical evolution in north and south Italy followed different paths owing to the fact that the tradition of civic community was conspicuously missing in South Italy whereas North Italy had historically vibrant grass-roots institutions.

Despite these similarities between "*Making Democracy Work*" and "*Discovery of Bangladesh*", there are significant differences in their methodology and assumptions. In one sense, the methodology of *Discovery of Bangladesh* is narrower than Putnam's analysis. The "isolation paradox" in *Discovery of Bangladesh* is strictly confined to economic behaviour of rational individuals whereas the concept of

social capital encompasses not only economic costs and benefits but also social norms and mores. In another sense, the methodology of *Discovery of Bangladesh* is broader than that of Putnam because it tried to identify the linkages between micro and macro institutions in Bangladesh (see chapter 3). No such attempt was made by Putnam. The studies also differ in their explanation as to why corporate social institutions at grass-roots level do not grow in certain regions. Putnam argues that civic institutions in South Italy were destroyed by the Norman autocracy. On the contrary, *Discovery of Bangladesh* argues that corporate villages are not necessarily antagonistic to imperial exploitation; in many cases corporate villages were promoted by imperial rulers themselves. For example, in Russia the "mir" (village community) was promoted by the czars for convenience of taxation and preservation of serfdom. *Discovery of Bangladesh* explained how the costs of cooperation at the grass-roots level were higher than its benefits. Such an analysis is missing in Putnam. In retrospect, it appears that, "social capital" theory is not needed to explain the historical evolution of Bangladesh region. However, the significance of Bangladesh's historical evolution for future political and economic development as sketched at pages 153 to 157 in *Discovery of Bangladesh* could be better explained in terms of social capital theory. The inescapable conclusion of this study is that there is an acute dearth of social capital in the rural settlements of the Bangladesh region. This proposition was, however, challenged by a reviewer on the ground that "people's self-development plays a critical risk-insurance role in terms of crisis" (Sen, 2000, p. 152). Unfortunately, in case of Bangladesh even major crises like imminent threats of breach in flood embankments fail to elicit such expected cooperative response. A Chinese proverb rightly says, "Dykes are useless without people to attend to them". In China, millions of people are mobilized to protect flood embankments. In contrast, local people in villages in Bangladesh are utterly indifferent to the urgency of maintaining earthen embankments in times of flood. The experience of repeated breaches in the embankment of the Gumti river during last two hundred years is a case in point.

It appears that the earthen embankment on the Gumti river at Comilla was in existence when the East India Company conquered Bengal. In 1770s when the embankment was breached, it was repaired at the cost of the East India Company and the embankment

had to be protected often by the Company's soldiers. There is no evidence of people's participation in such efforts (Islam, 2000) Richard Carstairs, an Indian civilian joined Comilla district administration in 1874. He left the following vivid description of Gumti flood in 1874.

"In connection with water there is also the question of floods. The river Goomtee which flowed past Comilla was confined between two embankments of such a height that when they were full to the brim the river was some eight feet above the level of the town. The embankments were a great anxiety to us, for the Rajah was supposed to keep them up, and, being neglected, they were full of rat-holes. When leaks developed, we had the utmost difficulty in getting men to work at stopping them. The population seemed to be divided into two classes - those whose caste forbade them to labour with the hands at all, and those whose honour forbade them to work save in their own fields. It was a degradation to such a man to work as a coolie. I remember one whose house stood below the leak, and would have been swept away had the embankment burst, and who yet utterly refused to do a hand's turn to save the embankment.

"It is not my business", he said, "but that of the Government (by the way it was not the Government's business, but the Rajah's)" and they must keep it up - I won't".

I went out to help at the leak about the time this was said. The river was almost lipping the bank. A rat-hole had scoured, and the whole bank was a mass of soft mud held together by a skin of turf. We took a bamboo and thrust it by the mere pressure of our hands twelve feet down into the mud. The public works sergeant was seated on a box, utterly done - not able to speak above a whisper, for his voice was gone with much shouting; and in this land swarming with sturdy peasants, the only labour we could get to work at the leak was that of the prisoners from the jail" (Carstairs, 1912, p. 39).

About seventy five years later, a similar description of Gumti flood was recorded by Dr. Akhter Hameed Khan:

"We motored ten miles on the high embankment of the angry river whose muddy current swirled powerfully but noiselessly. On our right the paddy fields were at least fifteen to twenty feet below the top level of the river. Frequently, we stopped to examine a "Ghogh" i.e. a place where water was seeping or oozing. These were the danger points...

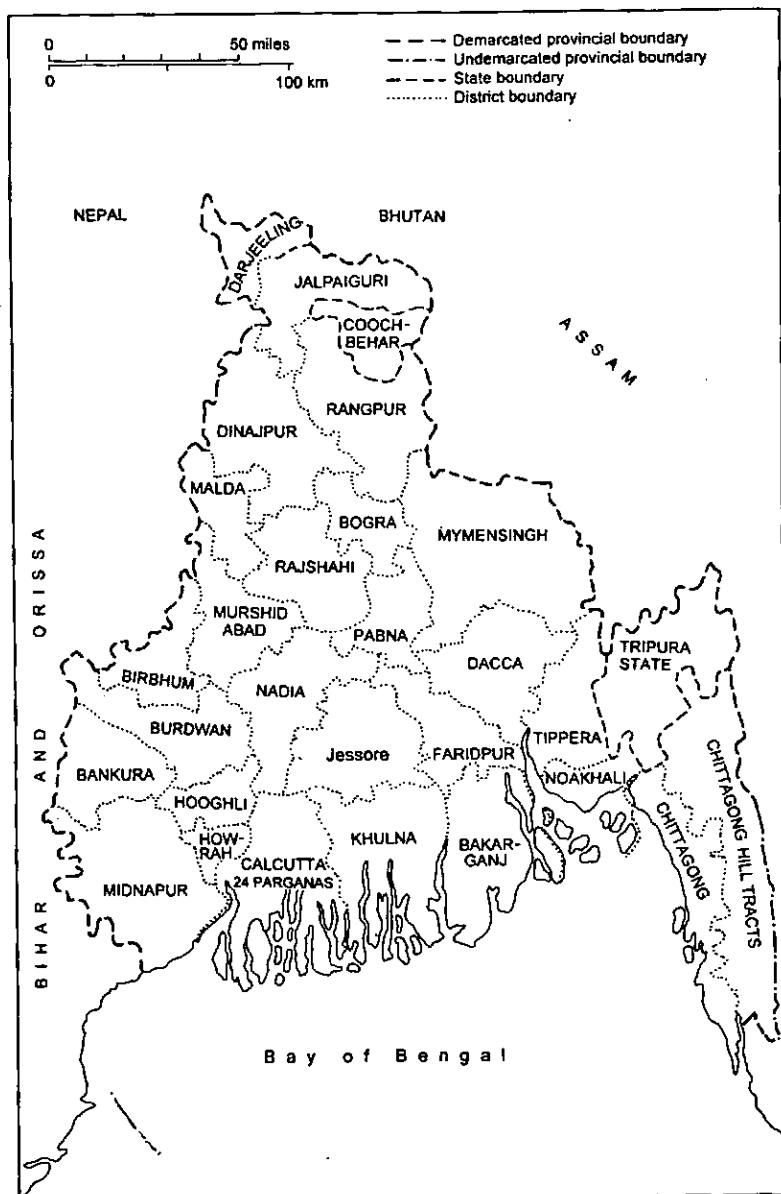
Some of the ghoghs were enlarging at an alarming pace while others had already been plugged. The river was being held, though precariously. It had not breached anywhere as yet. Life in the adjoining village seemed to proceed normally. The dangerous wall of water which hung over their head evidently did not worry the stoical villagers. Children and even grown ups were making a holiday, fishing and bathing merrily. They gathered in knots where the engineers jeep stopped on the banks. They watched the ghoghs which frightened us so much with obvious unconcern. They would not volunteer to help in finding out the under water seepage holes.

"Do you not realize". I asked a group "that if a breach takes place here you will be completely ruined? Then why don't you come forward to prevent it?"

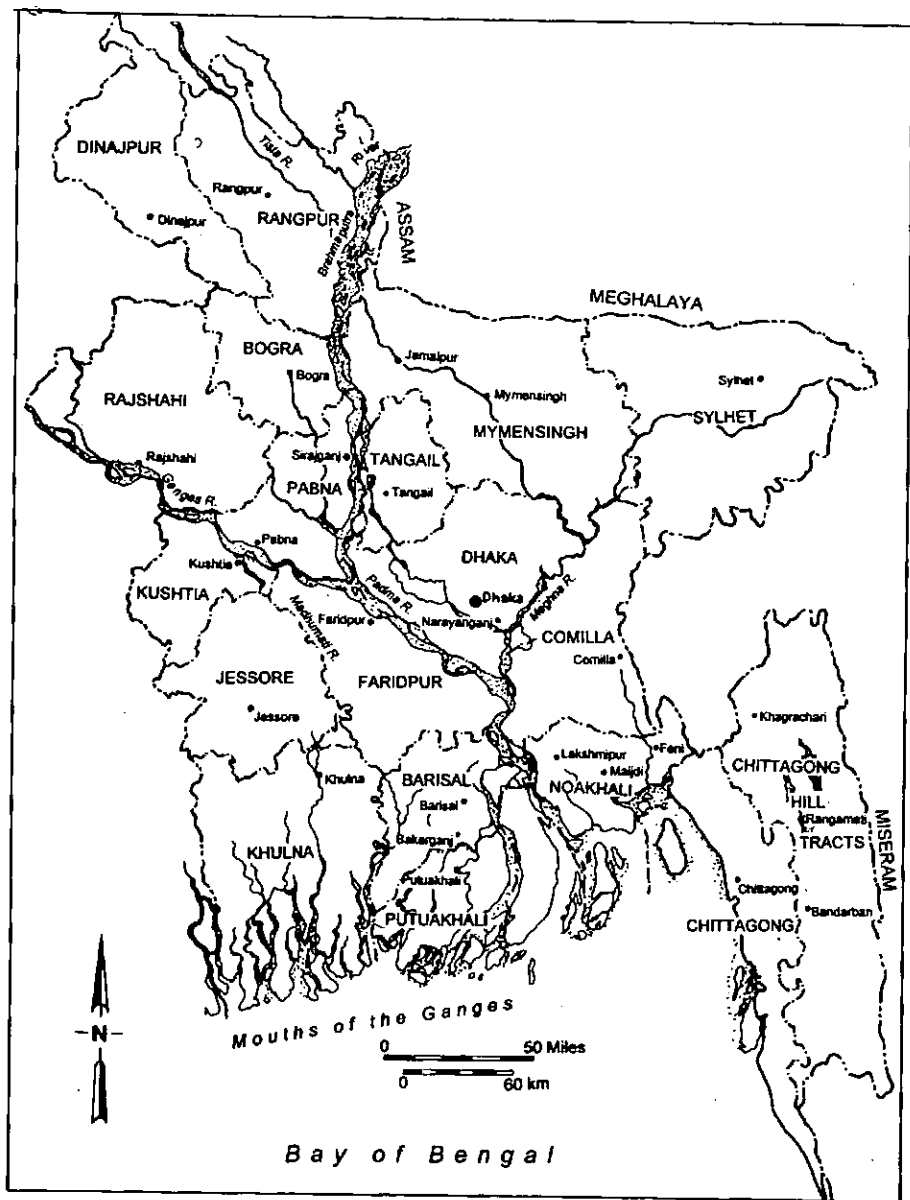
I did not get an answer from them. Why are they not anxious. I do not know and yet I cannot say that their attitude is foolish. Perhaps there is a deep wisdom in it". (Khan, 1983, Vol. I, pp. 341-342)

About fifty years have elapsed since Dr. Akhtar Hameed Khan recorded the above impressions. However, the situation remains unchanged and local people do not as yet participate in the protection of embankments. In times of emergency, Gumti embankments are protected by the army or government appointed contractors. A society which remains so inactive and stoical in the face of impending breach of embankment at their doorsteps is pathologically lacking in social capital. Indeed in such a society "Defection, distrust, shirking, exploitation, isolation, disorders, and stagnation intensify one another in a suffocating misama of vicious circles" (Putnam, 1993, p. 177).

Map 1
Bengal Districts, 1947



Map 2
Bangladesh



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