

## Chapter 1

### ANATOMY OF RURAL SETTLEMENTS

Throughout history the overwhelming majority of the people (about 97.7 percent in 1901 and about 80 percent in 1991) in the territories which constitute Bangladesh today have lived in rural settlements. The real history of Bangladesh was, therefore, enacted not in glittering royal courts but in humdrum habitations in the far-flung areas. The key to understanding of society in Bangladesh lies in proper appreciation of the dynamics of her rural settlements. Unfortunately the received doctrines on rural society in Bengal zone is based not on independent investigations on the nature and structure of rural settlements but on perceptions and preconceptions of generations of scholars on Indian village communities. The rural settlements in Bengal are, assumed to be indistinguishable from the village communities in South Asian subcontinent. This assumption is not only wrong but also misleading. It has precluded an understanding of the dynamics of social life in this region.

The uncritical acceptance of the assumption of ubiquity and universality of village community in South Asia by historians of Bangladesh is not at all surprising. The conventional paradigm of Indian village community is based on the consensus of administrators and scholars during last two hundreds years. As early as 1812, *Fifth Report of the Select Committee of the East India Company* described the village community as a "simple form of municipal government" under which "the inhabitants of the country have lived from time immemorial" (Quoted in Dutt 1960, Vol. 1 p.85). The role of village communities was romanticized by Charles Metcalfe, a

member of the Governor General's council in his celebrated minute in 1830. "The village communities", noted Metcalfe, "are little Republics, having nearly everything that they want within themselves and almost independent of any foreign relations. They seem to last where nothing else lasts" (Dutt 1960, Vol. I pp. 275). These idyllic descriptions of village communities by the British administrators influenced the nineteenth century evolutionists who assumed village communities as the prototype of social institutions the world over. Similarly, Karl Marx's analysis of Indian society is based on the reports of the British administration in India. He maintained that these idyllic village communities "had always been the solid foundation of oriental despotism" (Marx and Engels 1962, p. 350). The idealized and utopian vision of village communities also animated the Indian nationalists who believed that the return to old village government was the answer to pervasive poverty in India. There was hardly any dissenting opinion on the subject.

The recent anthropological research in South Asia have highlighted two major limitations of the conventional representation of Indian village. First, it is not correct to assume that villages were similar throughout the whole subcontinent. In reality, there were significant regional variations in the structure of rural settlements in South Asia. About a century ago, Baden-Powell (1896) cautioned the "impossibility of disposing of the Indian village community by referring the whole of the phenomena to one theory or generalised view of the subject". So far there has been hardly any systematic effort to define and analyse the regional characteristics of rural settlements in South Asia.

Secondly, of late there has been revisionist views among scholars regarding the traditional interpretation of idyllic village communities in South Asia. Some scholars are of the opinion that the village community was not at all a general phenomenon in South Asia in the nineteenth century. The existence of village communities was confined to a small area in the country between Agra and Delhi which needed a defence organization against the raiders from neighbouring desert in the last days of the Mughal rule. Daniel Thorner came to the conclusion that the simple form of village community in South Asia as described by Karl Marx was "perhaps a quite exceptional one" (1966). Some scholars question the very significance of the village either as a corporate entity or as a meaningful unit for analysis. Dumont and Pocock concluded that the village in India is only

an architectural and demographic entity and "not a prime social reality" (1957). Even those who defend the existence of a village as an interlocking community agree that the picture of self-sufficient village communities in South Asia is overdrawn (Srinivas 1987).

In view of limitations of the conventional paradigm of village community in South Asia, it is essential to reexamine the structure of rural settlements in Bangladesh region which are also styled as 'villages'. However, historical evidence on rural society in this region is scanty. It will, therefore, be more convenient to start with an analysis of the village at present rather than attempting the reconstruction of the village in the past.

An analysis of the statistics on the village in Bangladesh during last one hundred years indicates that the exact number of villages in Bangladesh is not known today, nor was it known in the recent past. Table 3 presents the census statistics on village in Bangladesh during 1891-1991.

**Table 3. Number of villages in Bangladesh, 1891-1991**

Year	Total No. of villages	Total area (in sq. mile)	Average number of village per sq. mile
1891	78912	50824	1.34
1901	85039	48700	1.74
1911	91221	54515	1.67
1921	60464	52411	1.15
1931	64575	53502	1.18
1941	59393	54091	1.09
1951	61424	54141	1.13
1961	64493	55126	1.17
1974	68385	55598	1.23
1981	83666	56977	1.46
1991	86038	56977	1.51

Source : Census Reports of Governments of Bengal and Bangladesh.

There are several inconsistencies in the data on villages presented in Table 3. The total number of villages fluctuated without any apparent reason. Table-3 indicates that the total number of villages increased from 78912 in 1891 to 91221 in 1911. It suddenly dropped to 60464 in 1921. It again increased to 64575 in 1931. In 1941 it fell to 59393. These fluctuations are not at all consistent with the steady increase of population during the corresponding period (see Table 4).

**Table 4. Growth of population in Bangladesh, 1891-1981**

Year	Total population (in thousand)	Average population per village
1891	26811	340.6
1901	28920	340.0
1911	31550	345.8
1921	33250	548.0
1931	35600	560.0
1941	41996	706.0
1951	41932	682.0
1961	50841	788.0
1971	79479	1162.0
1981	89900	1074.5
1991	111500	1295.9

Source : Census Reports of Governments of Bengal and Bangladesh.

Except the decade 1941-51, there was a steady increase of population during the period 1891-1991 whereas total number of villages fluctuated. The fluctuations in the number of villages cannot be explained by the variation in total area. Because of recurrent alluvion and diluvion, total area of a deltaic region like Bangladesh is not constant over time. Furthermore, the estimates of total area of Bangladesh varied as the estimates of actual area of some districts were revised on the basis of cadastral surveys. To take into account these variations, the average number of villages per square mile during the period 1891-1991 were also compiled in Table 3. It appears that the average number of villages per square mile declined from 1.74 in 1901 to 1.51 in 1991. There is no obvious explanation for this fall in average number of villages per square mile.

The most important reason for the fluctuations in the number of villages from census to census is the frequent change in the definition of village. Ever since the census of 1872, it was time and again emphasised that the village in Bangladesh is different from its counterpart in other areas of the sub-continent. The difficulties in defining a village in Bangladesh were expressed in the *Census Report of 1901* in the following words:

"A village may be either a collection of houses having a separate name or else the mauza i.e. the area treated as a village in the survey. The latter has the advantage of a definite unit regarding which there can be

no manner of doubts so long as the boundaries laid down at the survey are known, but it does not at the present time necessarily correspond to the residential village. One of the latter may spread over two mauzas or survey villages or two may lie in the same mauza or the mauzas may be altogether uninhabited. On the other hand, if the survey unit is neglected, it is very difficult to say with any precision what constitutes a village. There are many collections of houses which would be by one person called separate village while another would treat these as hamlets of other villages in the neighbourhood. In Bengal the records of Revenue survey have not been kept up to date and in most districts the survey mauza is no longer clearly traceable. Generally, therefore, a village was taken for census purposes to mean a residential village i.e. a collection of houses having a separate name with its dependent hamlets".

There are three concepts of village in Bangladesh; viz., the survey village or the mauza, the 'local' village and the census village. A mauza is an artificial unit which was defined for the purpose of cadastral survey. In the districts of Dinajpur, Rajshahi, Bogra, Pabna, Rangpur, and Jessore each parcel of land belonging to a separate landlord (i.e. an estate) was classified as a mauza. This approach, which was based on the experience of survey in Bihar, was discarded in the eastern districts. In most districts of Bangladesh, a mauza comprises a block of land which can be conveniently surveyed. Consequently, the natural boundaries of a terrain were taken into account in demarcating a mauza, and there was a close relationship between a mauza and a local village in the eastern districts. The Bengal Survey and Settlement Manual (1936, p. 307) lays down that the areas of the new villages should be demarcated "in accordance with locally recognized boundaries". Unlike mauzas, a local village may not always be a corporate unit territorially. They may not be located in a map easily. A local village is a mental entity. It is very difficult for an outsider to define a village. Only the inhabitants of a village have a clear perception of what village is their own. The definition of the census village, however, changed over time. Initially, local villages were treated as census villages. The definition of village was changed in 1921. An inhabited rural mauza was defined as a village in that census. Because of this change in definition, the number of villages dropped from 91221 in 1911 to 60654 in 1921. In the subsequent censuses till 1974, a rural mauza was treated as a village. This is why, the fluctuation in the number of villages since 1921 cannot be attributed to changes in the definition of the census village alone. It may, however, be argued that the early cen-

suses were defective and the results of later censuses which were undertaken after the partition of the sub-continent may be more reliable because the national data on the number of villages since the census of 1951 seem to be in line with the demographic trend. However, the disaggregated district data do not show consistent patterns. The number of villages occasionally decreased in some districts despite a steady increase in population in those districts. In order to test the reliability of data on villages in the recent censuses, the relationship between the percentage change in the number of villages in a district with the percentage change in population and percentage change in the total area of the district may be examined. If the statistics on villages are reliable, one would expect to find on the basis of cross-section data on districts a significantly positive correlation between the percentage change in the number of villages and the percentage change in population. Similarly, the relationship between the percentage change in the number of villages and the percentage change of the total area of the districts is expected to be positive. The correlation coefficients for these variables for the periods 1951-61, 1961-74 and 1974-1981 are shown in Table 5.

**Table 5. Correlation between the percentage change in the number of villages and the percentage change in population and in area of districts in Bangladesh**

Period	Correlation between the % change of number of villages and the % change of population in a district	Correlation between the % change of number of villages and % of the area of a district.
1951-61	0.147 (0.57)	0.072 (0.28)
1961-74	-0.292 (1.18)	0.135 (0.52)
1974-81	0.412 (1.75)	- (0.00)

(Bracketed number shows 't' statistics).

Source : Khan, 1987.

The correlation between the percentage change in the number of villages and the percentage change in population in districts, though positive is statistically insignificant for the decade 1951-1961. The same correlation turns out to be negative for the period 1961-74.

This suggests that the rates of increase in the number of villages were lower in districts which experienced higher rates of population growth. There is no obvious explanation for such an inverse relationship between the growth rate of population and the number of villages. The correlation between these two variables is positive for the period 1974-81. This relationship is not, however, statistically significant. Table-5 also shows that the variations in the number of villages are not significantly related to the changes in the area of the districts.

There is no satisfactory explanation for the fluctuations in the number of villages during 1951-1981. This casts doubts on the reliability of the census data on villages. These data are neither consistent nor accurate. For example, the census of 1981 shows that in Khulna district, where population increased by nearly 8 lakh during the period 1974-81, the number of villages fell from 3853 in 1974 to 3512 in 1981. It appears that the definition of village as enunciated by the census authorities was not consistently followed at the local level. The definition of village varied from district to district. The census reports of 1951 and 1961 state that "villages" were defined as "*rural mauzas*" However, the total number of villages in these censuses exceed the number of mauzas. Similarly in 1981, there were 60315 mauzas in Bangladesh whereas the number of villages was estimated at 83666.

Despite the experience in conducting population census over a century, no satisfactory statistics on village in Bangladesh is available as yet. The fault lies not with the agencies for the collection of data but with the concept of village itself. The villages in Bangladesh, to borrow Bertocci's (1970) phrase, are elusive. No reliable statistics can be collected on this subject till the concept itself is clearly defined.

Despite the enthusiasm of early British administrators like Munro, Metcalfe, Elphinstone and Malcolm for village communities, the colonial rulers in Bengal were sceptical about the very existence of village government. In Bengal, zamindars were presumed to be the natural leaders of rural areas. As early as 1866, Browne highlighted the uniqueness of rural settlements in eastern Bengal in the following manner: "The district of Tipperah is remarkable for the total absence of village municipal institutions. In other districts in Bengal, it is customary for the inhabitants of a village to pay some sort of respect to certain individuals, usually the oldest resident ryots and to obey their orders implicitly in all ordinary matters (...). But in this

district, there are no such functionaries, and although men of an influential position command a certain amount of respect, I have, in the course of my numerous tours, been much struck by the total absence of all recognised village authorities, a want which (...) I attribute to the nomadic character of the peasantry" (Quoted in Schendel 1980, p. 213).

The first census of Bengal in 1872 resulted in a systematic survey of rural institutions in this province. In the course of census operations, the colonial administrators felt the need for enlisting the support of existing rural institutions for enumeration of population. Beverley, the Superintendent of the first census noticed that though some forms of village government or organisation existed in Bihar and parts of west Bengal, village in the traditional sense did not at all exist in east and south Bengal. The census report of 1871 clearly indicates that the degree of corporateness of village institutions diminished as one moved from the west to the east. He concluded as follows: "Villages in Bengal proper are scattered about to a degree unknown in northern India and there is almost a total absence of communal organization and sympathy" (1872, p. 4).

Gait, in the census report of India, 1911, highlighted the difference between villages in east Bengal on the one hand and those in the central and west Bengal on the other. He noted, "In central and west Bengal though the houses are seldom crowded together and each has its own patch of homestead land, they are generally constructed on a single village site. Many of the villages are situated on the banks of silted up rivers and buried in a mass of bamboo and their vegetation and are very unhealthy. In the other two natural divisions, there is often no regular village site and the houses are very scattered" (1913, p.32).

J.T. Martin in his report on census of India in 1921 underlined the variation in structure of rural settlements in different parts of India. He observed: "In fact in large part of Bengal where owing to the peculiar configuration of the country, the houses are scattered over the face of the country without any reference to civic unity or corporate life, there is practically nothing which corresponds to a village in the ordinary sense of the word, and the mauza, which is for convenience's sake translated as a village, is merely that tract of land, inhabited or not, which has been demarcated as a unit for revenue purposes. Throughout the northern, central and western tracts of India, however, there is as a rule, considerably more correspondence between



the unit of area and the unit of residence than in the eastern provinces. Unlike the Bengali, the upcountry peasant is distinctly gregarious. Partly on this account and very largely owing to the necessity in unsettled times of combination against hostile attacks, the village in the north-west of India and throughout the United Provinces and the central tract of the Deccan has a distinct residential aspect which was to a certain extent considered in determining the unit of revenue administration" (1924, p. 78). In the same vein, Thompson in his report on the census of Bengal, 1921, noted as follows: "The village in the sense in which it is ordinarily understood in India and indeed in all parts of the world should not be used without qualification in respect of rural Bengal. The picture which the word conjures up in the mind is that of a close collection of houses belonging to cultivators and agricultural labourers employed on the land for two or three miles around, the village watchmen or other village servants, a money-lender and a few shopkeepers and artisans, potter, cobbler, tinsmith etc., a more pretentious house belonging to a landlord or middleman, some sort of common meeting place frequented by the villagers and a place of public workshop, a temple in a Hindu village or a mosque in a Mohammadan village. Such villages are not to be found in Bengal except in parts of Burdwan district" (1923, p. 97). W.W. Hunter in the *Imperial Gazetteer of India* reiterated the prevailing view on the weakness of corporate institutions in rural East Bengal. He observed: "The villages of Bengal vary greatly in different parts. In Bihar, especially south of the Ganges, the buildings are closely packed together, and there is no room for trees or gardens. As one goes eastwards, the houses, though collected in a single village site, are further apart and each stands on its own patch of homestead land, where vegetables are grown and fruit trees and bamboos afford a grateful protection from the glare of the tropical sun. Further east, again, in the swamps of East Bengal, there is often no trace of a central village site and the houses are found in straggling rows lining the high banks of rivers or in small clusters on mounds from 12 to 20 feet in height laboriously thrown up during the dry months when the water temporarily disappears. The average population of a village is 355, but the definition of this unit for census purposes was not uniform. In some parts the survey area was adopted, elsewhere the residential village with its dependent hamlet was taken, but in practice it was often very difficult to decide whether a particular group of houses should be taken

as a separate entity or treated as hamlet belonging to some other village" (1985, p. 34).

A review of the census reports and district gazetteers during last two hundred years clearly indicates consensus among the colonial administrators on two hypotheses. First the structure of village in Bengal Presidency differed significantly from those in other areas of South Asia. Secondly, the degree of corporateness of rural institutions in Bengal itself diminished gradually from the west to the east. In order to examine the first hypothesis, it is essential to recount the basic features of conventional representation of village in South Asia.

The term *gram*—the vernacular expression for village in Sanskrit refers to "clan", "community" or "host" and "aggregate". On the basis of its lexicographic meaning, Baden-Powell infers that *gram* refers to a "tribal grouping of limited number of families" (1896, p. 74). Though the expression *gram* or its dialectic forms (such as *gaon*) is used to refer to units of rural settlements over a large part of South Asia; forms of village vary from region to region. There are two main schools regarding the relationship between various forms of villages. According to one school of historians, different forms of villages relate to different stages of history. At the earliest stage, the joint ownership of land by a whole clan prevailed. This form of village community dissolved in later stages into ownership of land by isolated joint families which led to the formation of different types of villages. According to the other school, different types of villages originated separately in dissimilar environments and it is not possible to determine which was the earliest form of village.

The colonial administrators in the nineteenth century classified two forms of villages in South Asia from the point of view of land revenue system. They are: (1) *Raiyatwari* village and (2) Joint village. There are two main differences between the raiyatwari and joint village. First, the leadership in the *raiayatwari* villages lay in the hands of a hereditary village-headmen (Patel). A joint village was ruled by a village aristocracy consisting of a number of heads of houses (locally known as the *Panchayat*). Second, in the *raiayatwari* village, the ownership of wasteland of a village vested in the state though the villagers commonly used the adjoining waste. In the joint villages, the adjoining waste was considered an integral part of the village property and was at the absolute disposal of the owners as much as any other land.

There are two categories of Joint villages, viz., *pattidari* and *bhaiachara*. The main difference in these two forms of joint villages lies in the procedure for the distribution of land. In the *Pattidari* village, land is divided on the basis of ancestral share of an individual in the property. In the *bhaiachara* village, land is distributed in accordance with the size of labour force in a household or the rank of the individual holder. The distribution of land was, therefore, more egalitarian in *bhaiachara* villages than in *Pattidari* villages. Among the *Pattidari* villages the distribution of land was most unequal in zamindari villages which were owned by the landlords. According to Baden-Powell (1896) the *raiayatwari* villages were established by the Dravidian tribes who had originally cleared the land. The Joint villages were formed by the invading tribes who acquired the lordship of existing villages or founded new villages as overlords of the area. This is, however, merely a conjecture which is yet to be substantiated by historical research.

The classification of village on the basis of the system of land revenue ignores important differences among the villages. Starting with the assumption that villages in South Asia have a distinctive design based on the values of its civilization, Andre Beteille divides the villages of South Asia into two categories; (1) the core village and (2) the peripheral village (1980, pp. 108-113). The core villages are mostly located in the heartland of Indian civilization and were shaped by the Brahmanical tradition. There are three interrelated features of a "core" village, Firstly, it was a system of multiple gradation associated with an elaborate division of labour. Secondly, in a core village there were innumerable vertical ties of a diffuse and enduring nature between families and persons. Thirdly, there was a general acceptance of hierarchical values among different members of a "core" village. The 'peripheral' villages tended to be smaller, more homogeneous and less stratified. These villages were based on tribal and non-Brahmanical traditions. There are two main weaknesses of Beteille's classification. First, there is no objective criteria for differentiating the "peripheral" from "core" villages. Secondly, this classification does not take into account the regional variations in the structure of the peripheral villages.

Despite the diversity of forms of Indian villages, three interrelated characteristics of ideal-typical villages of South Asia can be easily identified. First, a village is a distinct administrative unit. Second, a village is an economic isolate. Third, a village is a social entity.

As an administrative unit, a village performs three main functions. First, a typical village government is responsible for the collection of land revenue and for the management of the wasteland adjacent to the village. Second, a typical village has its own machinery for the maintenance of law and order and for the settlement of intra-village disputes. Third, the village government undertakes public works which require the co-operation of all villagers (such as the construction and maintenance of irrigation systems and roads and the observance of village festivals). Each village had, therefore, an effective government. In the *raiyatwari* villages, the village government was headed by a *Patel* who was a hereditary headman. The headman had magisterial powers and various duties of police and protection. In the joint villages, the functions of the village government were exercised by the *panchayat*. The *Patels* or the *Panchayat* were assisted by a host of village officers. A village employed a *patwari* or village accountant. The village government also employed village watchmen and servants belonging to the untouchable caste. The following extract from a British Parliamentary Report in 1812 describes the functions of typical village officers in the early nineteenth century:

"The *potail*, or head inhabitant, who has generally the superintendence of the affairs of the village, settles the disputes of the inhabitants, attends to the police, and performs the duty of collecting the revenue within his village, a duty which his personal influence and minute acquaintance with the situation and concerns of the people render him the best qualified for this charge. The *kurnum* keeps the accounts of cultivation, and registers everything connected with it. The *Tallier and totie*, the duty of the former of which consists in gaining information of crimes and offences and in escorting and protecting persons travelling from one village to another; the province of the latter appearing to be more immediately confined to the village, consisting among other duties, in guarding the crops and assisting in measuring them. The boundary man who preserves the limits of the village, or gives evidence respecting them in cases of dispute. The Superintendent of Tanks and Water courses distributes the water for the purpose of agriculture. The Brahmin, who performs the village worship. The school master, who is seen teaching the children in a village to read and write in the sand. The calendar—Brahmin or astrologer, etc. These officers and servants generally constitute the establishment of a village; but in some parts of the country it is of less extent; some of the duties and functions being described above being united in the same person; in others it exceeds the above-named number of individuals". (Quoted in Marx and Engels 1962, p.349).

Anthropological studies in recent decades indicate that village officials continue to perform important role. As Dube points out, "Even today, the village retains its semi-autonomous character. Invariably it has a recognized headman with a definite set of duties and functions" (1955, p. 2). Mandelbaum however, reports that the officials of a village is not necessarily a leader of the village. The actual influence of a village headman was also dependent on personal abilities and social status of the official concerned (1990, pp 345-348).

Economic self sufficiency is another stylized characteristic of the village. As Beteille says, the people had conception of an ideal village comprising categories of people and they tried to make their particular village correspond as closely as possible to this ideal (1980, p. 108). Each village attracted to itself a body of resident craftsmen and menials, who were not paid in cash but were employed by the village on fixed remuneration. These remunerations were sometimes paid in the form of a bit of rent-free land or in the form of small payments in kind at the time of harvest. The list of such artisans includes blacksmith, potter, shoemaker, or cobbler, carpenter, barber and in some cases astrologers and priests. A typical village, in the words of Karl Marx was "based on domestic industry, in that peculiar combination of handweaving, hand-spinning and hand-tilling agriculture which gave them self-supporting power" (1962, p. 350).

Of late, the myth of economic self-sufficiency of Indian villages has been challenged by anthropologists. Srinivas noted the following loopholes in the myth of autarky of villages. First, basic commodities like salt, spices, sugar-cane, betel leaves, areca nuts, coconuts, tobacco, lime paste, silver and gold were not produced in every village. Historical evidence indicates that these items were consumed in all villages. This clearly suggests that since ancient times, there was significant intervillage trade which was conducted through weekly markets and occasional fairs. Secondly, the concept of economic self-sufficiency assumes that a village contains all essential types of artisans and servicing castes. Srinivas estimated that each self-sufficient village must have at least seven castes. About one fourth of all South Asian villages have less than 500 residents. Most of small villages did not have the requisite number of castes for economic self-sufficiency. Srinivas rightly concluded that though the villages were not in fact economically self-sufficient, they gave the impression of self-sufficiency because the villagers ate what they

grew, they paid the artisan and servicing castes in grain and a system of barter enabled grain to be used for obtaining various goods and services (Srinivas 1987, p. 55).

Opinions also differ on the social role of the village. According to Mandelbaum, "A village is not a neatly separable and conceptual package but it is nonetheless a fundamental social unit" (1970, p 329). The critics, however, maintain that the village was not a distinct social unit because the lower castes are not allowed access to wells and temples and consequently the village does not include all those living in it (Dumont and Pocock, 1957). Srinivas disputes this interpretation of the exclusion of *dalits* from wells and temples. He argues that "groups excluded in religious contexts may have important roles in secular contexts" and "the exclusion of a caste from particular contexts cannot be adduced as evidence of non-membership of local community" (1987, pp 50-51). Village solidarity found expression in social ceremonies, village rites and festivals. Very often a village has a central place of its own. In some villages, the house of the headman is the focus of social life; in others, temples or mosques are the hubs of social life. Furthermore, the close interrelationship between the villagers often engenders a sense of solidarity or "village patriotism". However, even from social point of view, villages in India were not water-tight compartments. "Caste ties stretched across villages and in a greater part of northern India, the concept of village exogamy, and the existence of hypergamy on a village basis, constitute an advertisement for inter-village interdependence. The partiality of peasants for pilgrimage and fairs also highlights the fact that the Indian village was always a part of a wider network" (Srinivas 1987, p.39). Though the canonical interpretation oversimplified the role of the village community in South Asia, social scientists continue to emphasize the corporateness of villages. The mainstream view on South Asian village may be summarized in the following words of Dube: "As a territorial as well as social, economic and ritual unit, village is a separate and distinct entity. The residents of this settlement recognize their corporate identity, and it is recognized as such by others. It is not uncommon to find in them a sentiment of attachment towards their own settlement site. In several matters the village acts as a unit" (1955, p. 7).

There is, however, difference of opinion as to whether village institutions were strengthened or weakened by the British *Raj*. According to traditional interpretation of South Asian history, the village in India in

its idealized form existed before the establishment of the British rule. It is argued that village communities were destabilized by the monetization of the rural economy in the wake of innovations introduced by the British imperialists. This interpretation is based on the assumption that a village community represents a natural economy. This view is disputed by a second school who maintains that village communities were created by the State as an expedient means for collection of land revenue. For example, Max Weber is of the view that the Russian *mir* (village) was not a primitive institution but a "product of taxation system and serfdom" (Weber, 1961 p. 33) The village government in Russia was responsible for the collection of revenue from all inhabitants in the village. Consequently, even if an individual member of a Russian village left the *mir* to take an entirely different calling, the village retained the right to call him back at any time to impose upon him the share of common burdens. The Russian land revenue system, therefore, intensified the solidarity of the villagers. Similarly it may be argued that the land revenue system introduced by the British rulers bolstered the village communities in those provinces of South Asia where all villagers were jointly made liable for the payment of land revenue. The British rulers also created the institution of *lambardar* (who virtually acted as a headman) in areas where there was no recognized headman. Though economic innovations introduced by the British rulers seriously undercut the self-sufficiency of the village, their administrative measures in some provinces worked in the opposite direction by rejuvenating the village communities.

Outwardly the village in Bangladesh is very often portrayed as a clone of its north Indian counterpart. One economic historian maintained that from time immemorial the village has been the "basic unit of the economic structure of the country" (Islam 1984, p. 18). The myth of economic autarky of the village in Bangladesh have been blown out of proportions. It has already been shown that most village communities were not likely to be economically self-sufficient. Srinivas's arguments regarding interdependence of villages are equally valid about rural settlements in Bangladesh region. The main reason for economic isolation of the village in north India is the lack of a viable transportation system. As Marx said "The village isolation produced the absence of roads in India and the absence of roads perpetuated the village isolation. On this plan a community existed with a given scale of low inconveniences without intercourse with

other villages, without the desires and efforts indispensable to social advance" (Marx and Engels 1962, p. 355).

This picture of isolation of the villages does not seem to be valid for Bangladesh. In this deltaic region, most of the villages were connected with each other through waterways. Being perennially navigable, most of the rivers were natural routes for long distance and inland trade. Historical evidence clearly indicates regular intervillage trade through weekly markets (*hats*) and fairs (Majumdar 1943, pp 559-560).

Furthermore, available statistics indicate that most of the villages in Bangladesh were small. For example, the census of 1891 reports that 76.08 percent villages in Bangladesh contained less than 500 people (see Table 6). Even in 1981, 38.49 percent villages in Bangladesh had less than 500 residents. In 1891, 33420 villages in Bangladesh contained less than two hundred inhabitants. According to Kautilya, villages should consist of not less than a hundred and not more than five hundred families of cultivators of service classes (Kautilya 1967, p. 45). Assuming a minimum family size of five persons, population of a village should, according to Kautilya, vary between 500 and 2500 persons. By Kautilya's standard, most of the villages in Bengal in the nineteenth century were small. Buchanan Hamilton's accounts also indicate that most of the villages in Bangladesh region were very small. It is doubtful whether most villages in Bangladesh ever contained all the castes and occupations required for a self-sufficient village. This point was stressed by Gait in the census report of 1901: "The village organization with its complete outfit of servants and artisans, who render it independent of all outside help, which is so common in other parts of India, never seems to have fully developed in the greater part of Bengal proper and there is a great dearth of local craftsman which is now being met by the settlement of immigrants from Bihar". The same report states that a large number of villages in Bihar and Orissa approximated the idea of autarky. Whenever a new village was formed in Bihar and Orissa, the founders of the village used to secure their own staff of village servants and artisans, who were induced to settle in such villages by small grants of land averaging about an acre in area, which they enjoyed in addition to their customary remunerations from the villages they served (Gait, 1902). These facts clearly suggest that the village in Bangladesh is not at all a distinct economic unit. This finding is also consistent with the mainstream interpretation of the Indian village.



**Table 6. A comparison of the percentage of villages according to population size in 1891 and 1981**

Size of Population	Percentage of Villages in 1891	Percentage of Villages in 1981
Less than 500	76.08	38.49
Between 500 and 999	16.20	26.11
Between 1000 and 1999	6.40	19.95
Between 2000 and 2999	0.87	6.86
Between 3000 and 5000	0.32	5.32
Over 5000	0.13	3.27

Source : Census of Bengal 1891 and Provisional Estimates of Census of Bangladesh, 1981.

Unlike its north Indian counterpart a village in Bangladesh was never a distinct administrative entity. The areas which now occupy Bangladesh never had the experience of *raiyatwari*, *pattidari* or *bhaichara* villages. The institution of village headman in north Indian sense was unknown in Bangladesh. They were different from village government in north India in two ways. First, unlike the typical village communities of South Asian subcontinent, there was no organised and distinct village administration in Bangladesh region. A typical village community in South Asia was responsible for the collection of land revenue, keeping law and order, management of wasteland, and, construction, operation and maintenance of physical infrastructure (such as irrigation and communication network). The Jataka stories of the fifth century attest to such energetic communal life in South Asian villages (Basham 1959, p. 199). The functions of the village headman in medieval India as described by Abul Fadl and Monserrate clearly indicate that revenue in north Indian villages in the Mughal times was paid collectively and the village government used to operate a common fund (Habib, 1985, pp 134-155). The *raiyatwari* villages were headed by a *patel*, a hereditary headman. In the joint villages, the administration was run by the *panchayat*. Such village governments were unknown to Bangladesh region. There was no joint liability for the rent of the lands in the entire village. It is not, therefore, at all surprising that the British rulers in the eighteenth century Bengal did not find any such village government. Bangladesh is the only region where there is not a single instance of the settlement by the British rulers of an estate with the village community or village headman (Government of East

Pakistan 1959, p. 32). As revenue was not paid jointly, there was no common fund in the village.

Secondly, the system of employing village officials did not at all exist in the region. The posts of *Patwari* or village accountant in the traditional sense are unknown here (see Postscript). The only village official who was occasionally employed in the rural areas was the village watchmen or *chowkidar*. The posts of other village officials were conspicuously absent in Bangladeshi villages.

Because of the assumption of universality of village communities in South Asia, some historians maintain that elements of village government existed in ancient Bengal. According to one historian, land in a village belonged not to the state but to the whole village or village assemblies. This hypothesis was discussed in details by Islam (1984, pp 107-109) who rightly concluded that this hypothesis is based on an misinterpretation of available epigraphic sources. According to another historian, the expression "*gramika*" in Damodorpur inscription (circa 6th century) may refer to the existence of the office of village headman in ancient Bengal (Roy 1400 B.S.). There are two reasons for rejecting the hypothesis that village headman in north Indian sense existed in Bangladesh region. First, inscriptions relating to property transfer in this region clearly indicate there was no focal administrative authority in the village (Morrison 1970). According to Damodorpur inscription, land transfer had to be notified to *Mahattaras* (leading men of the village), *ashtakuladhikaranas* (council of eight), *gramikas* (village heads) and the householders. Similarly the Mallasarul plate indicates that the property transfer had to be communicated to *agraharina* (leading men), *mahattara* (an elderly respected person), *bhatta* (learned men), *khadgi* (swordsmen) and *vahanayaka* (a superintendent of transportation). The Dharmaditya B plate also states that land transfer had to be notified to the leading men of the *vishaya*. Had there been a powerful village headman, notifying the leading men of the village and the house-holders would not have been necessary at all. Secondly, the office *gramika* is not at all included in the list of local authority in Mallasarul and Dharmadotya B Plates. It suggests that the *gramika* was not an integral part of rural administration. It is not also clear whether the *gramika* is an honorific title or an employee of the state. The inscriptions clearly suggest that villages in Bangladesh were not run by headmen or panchayats but were dominated by the elites such as *mahattaras*, *bhattas*, and *kutumabas*. This pattern continued till

the 19th century when the British administrators in Bengal reported about "absence of the germs of corporate life" (Thompson 1923) in the rural Bengal.

Though a village in Bangladesh region lacked the characteristics of either a distinctive administrative unit or well-defined economic isolate, it displayed some of the marks of a social entity. The sense of identity of a village was often demonstrated in social functions (such as theatrical performances) and religious rites (such as rites for the prevention of epidemics) (Tarafder 1965). There are also occasional references to village patriotism in medieval Bengali literature. In *Chaitanya Charitamrita* a Quazi when threatened by Chaitanya, reportedly, responded as follows: "By village relationship Chakravarti (i.e. Chaitanya's maternal grandfather) is my father's brother, village relationship is stronger than blood ties. (Quoted in Shahidullah 1967, p. 122). Historical evidence also indicates that village influentials often resolved local disputes. Recent anthropological and sociological research suggests the existence of *samaj*—"an indigenous social institution through which villagers enacted and enforced the normative rules by which their social lives and normal codes were governed" (Adnan 1990, p. 169). The recent village studies also document in some villages the existence of *shalish* mechanism which represents a court of village influentials. However, recent evidence also indicates that the institution of *samaj* is eroded by selfish behaviour of local influentials (Arens and Van Beurden 1977). The membership of *samaj* is not fixed. *Samaj* groups often break up; some times they also merge. There is considerable variation in the influence of *samaj* from region to region. This hypothesis is also supported by historical evidence. It is interesting to note that there is no uniform designation for village influentials in Bangladesh. In Comilla district the village influentials are known as *sardars* and *matbars*. In Dhaka district, they are known as *murubbis*. In Rangpur district they are addressed as *Paramanik* or *Dewan*. In Bogra district they are known as *mondols*. In some areas, there are informal councils of elders which are known as *panchayats* or *bichar sabhas*. There are also informal social groups which are described as *samaj*, *rewai* or *mallots*. These variations in designation suggest that there was no uniform system of social control. It is also evident from recent empirical research that these social groups never exercised the formal functions of village government. A comparative analysis suggests that social cohesion in Bangladeshi villages

was much weaker than that in north Indian villages (Thompson, 1923). In most of the villages in Bangladesh, there was no central place for socializing. Available evidence strongly suggest that historically the corporateness of villages in Bangladesh was much weaker than that of rural settlements in other parts of South Asia. J.H. Lindsay rightly concluded that the village community was a myth as far as Bengal is concerned, it also did not exist in the pre-British times (1964, p. 512).

The second hypothesis of the British administrators that the corporateness of village institutions increased from the east to the west in Bengal is based on qualitative evidence. However, the field observations of the British administrators are supported by recent anthropological research. Following Mandlebaum, three main types of rural settlement patterns may be identified in South Asia. First, a nucleated village is a tight cluster of houses surrounded by the fields of villages, perhaps with an outlying hamlet or several satellite hamlets. Secondly, "linear settlements" refer to habitations in which houses are dispersed "with little or no physical demarcation where one village ends or where another begins". The third category includes small hilly settlements which contain a scattering of homesteads. (Mandlebaum 1974, p. 337).

Anthropological studies indicate that the village in west Bengal region is mainly nucleated whereas the settlement pattern of village in Bangladesh is linear. The nucleated villages tend to be much older and most of its land is held by locally dominant upper castes. The linear village, by contrast, tends to be new settlements where landownership is more evenly distributed. In the linear settlement, no decision could be taken by a single individual. In such villages, all influentials in the village have to be invited to settle disputes or to make public decision. Obviously it is easier to control nucleated villages than dispersed linear settlements. Apart from Bangladesh region, linear dispersed settlements existed in Kerala and Kankan in South India.

Both historical and anthropological evidence indicate the preponderance of dispersed linear settlements in Bangladesh region. The district magistrate of Barisal district in south Bengal, described a typical village in the 19th century in the following manner: "The houses are scattered and there is little of collectivist village life. Each house stands by itself on its mound, surrounded by a thicket of fruit trees as there is no house in sight or nearer than 100 yards".

In the same vein, Bertocci described a village in the Comilla district. "The village cannot be seen, as peasant villages elsewhere have often been described as a territorially-bounded residential system. Rather it is at best an intervening organization in an institutional constellation which is geographically expansive and demographically inclusive in character in which both formal and informal groups are flexibly relevant or not relevant to the individual depending on social control" (Bertocci, 1970).

An analysis of historical evidence also suggests that the village in Bangladesh region in the ancient times was much smaller than those in west Bengal. The Bhattera copper plate of Govindakeshra (circa 13th century) indicates that the average area (based on the data of 28 villages) of a village in Sylhet district was 468 acres; the average number of household per village was 10.5 only. It may be mentioned here that all the census reports since 1891 show that the average population per village in Sylhet was always the lowest in Bangladesh region. According to Taparanadighi copper plate (circa 12th century), Belhisthi village in Vikrampura contained only 200.1 acres of land. By contrast, the villages in West Bengal were larger and more populous than those in east Bengal. Naihati copper plate of Vallala Sena (12th century) records that Vallalahitha village in Burdwan occupied 1916.15 acres including waste land and waterways. Govindapur copper plate of Lakshman Sena (12th century) mentions that the area of Viddarsashan village in Burdwan was 400.5 acres (including waste land and forest). (Roy 1400 B.S.). Though historical evidence on village size in Bangladesh and west Bengal region is scanty, the conclusions suggested by such evidence are consistent with recent anthropological findings on the pattern of rural settlements. The preponderance of small villages in Bangladesh region seems to have continued till the early years of this century.

Following Popkin (1979), rural settlements may be broadly divided into two categories: (1) corporate village and (2) open village. Most of the world's peasantry used to live in corporate villages, most of them now live in open villages. A corporate village is a closed organization "with same form of collective responsibility for the payment of taxes, clear boundaries between the village and the outside world, restrictions on landownership, a well-defined concept of village citizenship and frequently with land that was owned or managed by the village". An open village was characterized by "individual responsibility in the payment of taxes, indistinct boundaries

between the village and the outside world, few or no restrictions on landownership, imprecise notions of village citizenship and privately owned land" (Popkin 1979, pp. 1-2, 32-82). Corporate and closed villages are ideal types which may not always exist in their pure forms. Very often there may be something in between. The village community which was romanticised by the British administrators was a corporate village. Such villages existed in certain parts of north and south India. By contrast, the villages in the deltaic areas of Bengal which now constitute Bangladesh were open. The villages in west Bengal region which contains nucleated villages were a mix of corporate and open villages where the elements of corporate villages were predominant.