

This is a single chapter from *Make Or Break: Bangladesh In The 1990's*

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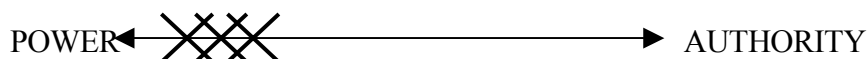
The Style of Leadership

In this examination of five broad categories of societal factors that slow development in Bangladesh the exercise of leadership is the briefest and most straightforward, but this doesn't imply any relative lack of importance. Even if more inclusivity, dignity, integration and abstractions could be built into an average Bangladeshi's thinking, a refusal to alter how leadership operates would alone cancel any hope of change. Conversely, if only leadership structures were changed, the other four categories would be forced to follow. Leaders, by definition, lead; hence if they change, others will come after. If they fail, societies can fall - which could have been the case in Mohenjo Daro thousands of years ago. A struggle between the Harrapan administrators and priests for societal headship may have been the primary cause of that ancient state's collapse. Leadership's role is central and its centrality universal. Mohenjo Daro disappeared several millennia ago yet such power tussles are repeated in every daily paper's reporting. As the rich-poor divide widens (which is inevitable in a misappropriated aid based economy) the fight for power can only intensify.

Aid involves adding money, materials and expertise into a poor country. Since it isn't possible to simultaneously distribute everything to everyone the whole aid process depends on a cadre of intermediaries. Whether aid is successful or not, therefore, hinges totally on the correct selection of suitable "go-betweens" to translate outside ways and means into local realities. Due to their direct control of vast resources these go-betweens effectively direct the country just as a rudder steers a huge boat driven by a powerful engine. Of all the errors surrounding foreign aid to Bangladesh, its failure to recognise these local leadership dynamics may well be the most damaging. Foreign aid's preference for "convenient" (meaning bi-cultural, bilingual, ambitious, and urbanised) intermediaries has resulted in attracting the most greedy, least altruistic and furthest out of touch with poor village realities into positions of leadership. By choosing such people the aid machine has inevitably helped to construct a sub-group not merely unwilling to help the majority but actively working to exploit them further. This extent this apartheid-like bias prompts the cynics' wish to stop all aid.

Not that foreign aid is totally to blame for the exploitation prevalent in Bangladeshi society. Although a Muslim country, an unacknowledged caste system stratifies the population and facilitates the abuse of the lower tiers by those above them. This is rarely admitted; poverty remains "their" fault. To be quick in blaming others is a human trait and Bangladesh society merely accentuates it by the exclusive-minded's mistrust of the outsider, plus the ease with which those of low self worth will believe badly of their neighbours.

Since leadership is of paramount importance in deciding whether development's success, an examination of leadership styles would be useful. One useful variant is the "Power - Authority" continuum, which places Bangladesh well to the left, as shown in the diagram.



Power and authority (like pride and dignity) are often used as synonyms, overlooking their deeper incompatibility. Both, it is true, measure how effectively leaders can impose their will

over how wide an audience. But there the similarities end, since leadership has two possible ways of bridging the gap between having an idea and mobilising others to realise it. Power forces its way across this gulf. Sometimes violence - actual or threatened - is used as power's crudest (and therefore most obvious) tool. More common is the use of a reward - again, either actual or promised. This reward is something quite distinct from the task itself and in many societies money has been agreed on as its concrete expression. In 1990's modernity, people consider themselves normal if they spend forty hours every week producing something they think to be useless for a company they feel no kinship with, solely to earn money (which in turn allows them to acquire material comforts).

Status is the second powerful reward which is entirely separated from the task itself. Usually, of course, money and status are tied (with varying degrees of proximity) to each other, so that doctors/lawyers/dentists all tend to be both well paid and highly respected. Artists, somewhat exceptionally, tend to have their expertise monetarily undervalued until (for the very few, and usually following their demise) some of them enjoy a massive over-estimation. For most who try and pay the bills using their artistic skills, the sheer excitement of exploring their own creativity provides one compensation for the relatively low hourly wage reckoned.

Power, then, exerts its pressure either via fear or favours; the latter having currencies of money and/or status. Money brings comfort, and the ability to confer indulgences in rare, expensive pastimes. Status allows a person to command others to do their bidding. "An officer" it was once said to me, without any trace of sarcasm "is someone who has someone else to carry their bag for them." And not only officers. I watch our neighbour, a doctor, walk twice each day the twenty paces between his house and his car. Behind him for every trip is his driver, carrying the plastic satchel like a talisman. (The driver, by the way, regularly cheats on the petrol - as petrol stations in their turn regularly use false counters to cheat their customers. Drivers commonly augment their pay either by siphoning petrol off for resale, if they have the petrol tank key, or by making a deal with the local garage. The latter is a less chosen scam of course, since profits need to be split two ways). Every day the respected doctor and the respectful lackey perform their ritual that denotes the bag owner's rank to a dusty back lane in Dhaka. Afterwards, the driver can often be seen stretched out flat, the seat-back down, dozing in the car's trapped afternoon heat. It's not so much laziness as under employment; the doctor sahib needs him in a few hours and simply tells him to wait. Another refinement of power - the ability to make people do not just unchosen, but inconvenient or even unpleasant tasks.

The doctor, by the way, seems not to mind too much about his employee's cheating. The vociferousness of his periodic denouncements suggests outrage, but actually signifies little, since gruff reconciliation closes every attack. "They all do it" he has told me. "What to do? These people cannot be trusted". "These people" being (to an outsider's eyes) more alike than not to the story-telling doctor, but each species recognises its own sub-divisions. I suspect the doctor gets his money's worth anyway. His driver's major task is less to carry or fetch, more to demonstrate the wealth and status his employer possesses. A little taking-of liberties by the driver doesn't lessen the outward show of well being the doctor can display. In fact, by his largesse in publicly writing-off the regular minor thefts, our doctor only increases the perception of himself as a man of means. A man of power.

Authority is something distinct from power. Rather than forcing people to do what they don't want for the sake of a reward, authority convinces people that a thing is worth doing for reasons beyond self-interest. Power drives; authority leads. Power coerces; authority inspires. Power and authority both involve the few leading the many, but via utterly different methods. As different as the pen and the sword, or servitude and friendship. Authority enlists a companion's help while power press-gangs sullen service.

Leadership also has a different effect than power. Whereas power belittles the many by exaggerating the importance of the few, authority challenges the majority to grow by trusting and involving them with leadership. It invites everyone to be involved in the ongoing creation of society, and creativity is one of the things that satisfies the human psyche most deeply (which explains why artists are willing to give up status and money, normally of paramount value).

Just as pride pulls down and dignity builds up, so does authority promote growth while power leads to stagnation. Power-brokered Bangladeshi development has approximated to the few getting the lot, which upsets the many. Their frustrations can only grow as a total lack of fresh initiatives make real change unlikely. It would take a miracle for the rich to willingly give substantial parts of their resources away; it would take a revolution for the poor to believe in themselves enough to demand it.

Not, however, a revolution of guns and shouting. For the majority to face down the minority, countless individuals would have to accept a larger measure of responsibility for their own lives than the patronage-based pattern allows for. Patronage uses power, and Bangladeshis search out patrons (it is reassuring to be able to look along a chain of being and fix yourself firmly in place). Thus economic growth is stalled as much by the majority's unwillingness to turn away from familiar leadership structures as the leaders' unwillingness to turn aside from their power. Were authority to become the way leadership operated in Bangladeshi society, the poor would have to wean themselves both from fearing their leaders' anger, and from finding themselves unworthy. The danger being that if authority doesn't supplant power, Bangladesh's future could well collide with a famine (as the poor are made yearly poorer) or a text book revolution (as the episodes of mob-sanctioned anger finally connect with each other).

Having power-based leadership makes development patchy at best, short term at most, and potentially explosive at last. Not that having such medieval dynamics (for that is what Bangladesh's bias towards power leadership amounts to) causes any obvious upset to my local friends. On the contrary; the familiar is reassuring and living in a stratified society where the upper echelons make no apology for their exercise of privilege is familiar. Rather, relationships are more likely to founder when there is no clear hierarchy and it is unclear who takes precedent. Peers often don't quite know how to talk to each other, either literally (there being three tiers of "you" in Bengali; *apni*, *tumi*, and *tui*) or figuratively. While compartmentalised thinkers are usually practised enough to cope with ambiguity, the distance between acquaintances is considered so crucial that precision is demanded.

Indeed, much of the animosity towards Westerners may stem from the fact that often the societal niche they fill in Bangladesh is no longer clear cut. The English Raj's white arrogance has passed, but its expatriate replacement is multi-hued and variably motivated. Money draws some, religious zeal others, anticipated career advancement a third group, and a sense of exile a fourth. For Bangladeshis a feeling of wistfulness sometimes surfaces. Pre-1947 was a simpler world

where white was addressed as “sir” and surreptitiously cheated. The unsignposted 1990’s can prove confusing, and confusion can be a prod for anger. That rage then is randomly flung in guerilla-like haste at any passing symbol of leadership. A bus can be the target, or a private car, or a white face, or a political rally. So far anger at exploitation hasn’t gained sufficient momentum to either convince the poor majority to assume control of their own lives or demand changes in their rulers’. They grab bricks to throw, but fail to seize the moment.

Perhaps the most succinct way to express the difference between the two types of leadership is to ask what they give to those who have power and authority, respectively. Power gives rights, particularly the right to own disproportionate mounts of money and status. Powerful Bangladeshis have the rights of effective legal immunity too. This isn’t written on any formal document but all know the wealthy can do as they please. A visitor to one of the low-lying off-shore islands was bluntly reminded of this when challenging a local leader’s blatant misappropriation of allocated funds. “In this place, I am the law” he was told. “What I say is legally right because I am the one saying it.” Unless the 1991 cyclone’s twenty-foot tidal waves swept him from power, the state (in that place) is still him. And, of course, his survival could be expected simply because none of the plus-or-minus 140,000 death toll came from those 3% of the affected population who squeezed into the available cyclone shelters. Three percent can’t be called blanket protection, but it does cover the most powerful - and the powerful, focusing as they do on the rights of office, aren’t too troubled if their survival (and, for that matter, their comfort) is only at others’ expense.

So it is that the powerful survive. For those who spearheaded the relief efforts after the 1991 cyclone disaster the most emotionally taxing facet tended not to be the match-stick like tangle of limbs and corpses. Rather it was the re-emergence of the protected powerful, quick to collect the best of the offered aid. Long ingrained habits of demanding first (and best) service while dictating others’ actions had them pushing themselves into the vacuum of the storm’s wake. They were less damaged and more organised. They also had their history of rule suggesting that when normality returned and the old patterns re-emerged, the weak’s best hope of future favours lay in their expedient mollification of their momentarily-weakened rulers. Thus the powerful thrive and (sadly) the weak are all-too-often party to the imbalance of power. By trading their rights for a hope of later patronage the poor buy their own lack of a voice. The silence of the lambasted.

Authority, on the other hand, gives responsibilities rather than rights. Rather than asking “what will I get from this” those who rule by authority wonder ‘how will others benefit’ and subdue their individual desires in favour of something seen as grander and more worthwhile. Such rulers can’t accept that progress of the few at the cost of the many is actually progress at all. It’s back to the competition/cooperation dichotomy again with only cooperation (corresponding to authority) able to keep a society together in the long term. Authority’s focus is to serve the wider community, not merely the narrow inner circle. It can operate within a religious or ideological framework, but the sense of servant leadership is present in all types of authority.

What type of rulership is exercised is actually a more fundamental question than merely whether dictatorship or democracy is the chosen style of government. While all three countries of the Indian subcontinent have tended towards the latter system since 1947 (India has had almost uninterrupted democracy throughout the entire period, while Bangladesh and Pakistan alternate between the military and the electorate) the shift away from power to authority hasn’t been quite

as straightforward. Ironically, one of the subcontinental leaders least interested in self-aggrandisement throughout the last half century (Indira Gandhi) was also the person who, during the Emergency, took India further away from formal democracy than any other modern Indian leader. It is no recommendation of her misrule at that time to admit that those who suffered most then were the middle class minority, while falling prices for essentials primarily benefitted the poor majority.

Bangladesh has few models of authority-based leadership at any layer of control, although the BNP propaganda writers currently present the short sharp rule of Zia Rahman in the late 70's as such an ideal. Perhaps, too, history may judge his widow, current Prime Minister Khaleda Zia, as equally altruistic; her story awaits. Whether democracy or military, leadership's aim throughout the post-1971 years has consistently been directed to the crowning 20 per cent's advantage. Power, in other words, has been the presiding spirit of Bangladeshi leadership. Sometimes, (as in the 1970's Mujibur Rahman administration) it was less the rulers themselves than their surrounding scavengers who gained from their exalted position. By 1975 (for example) Sheik Mujib was dead but many of his sycophants were rich - at the cost of hopes for an all-inclusive national development.

Once again Singapore serves as a counterpointing example. While few outside his own party would claim that Lee Kwan Yew was a dedicated follower of democracy, Singapore's sustained, shared growth does testify to his authority-based leadership style. Had he not seen his country as a unified entity wherein an advantage to one sector had to translate to advantage to all, modern Singapore would have become another homogenous-but-stratified society with internecine fighting draining the bulk of its citizens' energies. Would have become an urban version of Bangladesh, in other words. Happily, an "all for one and one for all" solidarity prevailed and fuelled Singapore's affluence.

An attitude which, in Bangladesh, has twisted into "all for the few and the few to remain". Being a bari-centred consciousness, power gets hoarded primarily along family networks. It has been said that the British ruled from Rangoon to the Khyber Pass by selecting the 1000 key positions and placing Indians of ability and integrity (from the colonial viewpoint) into each job. "In the Pakistani period only one hundred families ruled us" is a commonly heard street-level complaint. "Now it's only ten families" some add, not sure who to scapegoat anymore. Whether the arithmetic is exact or not the trend is clear. Less getting more, and those less fixed in particular families.

Power hoards while authority shares. Power divides to rule while authority unites. Power demands people to act while authority inspires them to sacrifice and effort. Power rules in Bangladesh, held in place by local, learned habits and false foreign assumptions. The wrong people get promoted and they feel right with their elevation.

The existence of honest, capable people being kept from leadership by their very qualities is one of the most poignant sadnesses of Bangladesh's poverty. Those Bangladeshis who refuse to take bribes lose money and status. They are less likely to be noticed as candidates for the aid machine. If they haven't been taught English language and Western mannerisms their distance from decision making echelons will probably increase. Relevant skills and a willingness to

sacrifice in helping the 80 per cent deprived majority may marginalise, not centralise, a would-be leader of authority.

As it is, Bangladesh limps along with its ad hoc arrangements and unchanging power patterns to provide leadership. Democracy in these post-Ershad days looks as healthy as hope could aim for - which isn't excessively high. Government, while bigger than a puppet show remains stunted as an independent force. The armed forces still hold much of the country's rule (Ershad was safe until they nodded at the opposition). Foreign banks and donors, too, exert heavy pressure on Bangladesh's elected or usurping leaders. Students form anarchic militia, criminals organise themselves into gangs. Political parties solidify around personalities and improvise policies when elected, then demonstrate when not. A desire for power is the one constant that threads Bangladesh command structures together.

Thus power thrives in a society where the few accept their luxuries as a right despite the cost being others' survival and the many are quick to abdicate responsibility in the hope that God may overlook their petty thievery. Nature displays a variety of inter-species relationships, such as symbiotic, commensalism or parasitic, but Bangladesh's intra-societal division of the ready-to-exploit and the willing-to-be-exploited has no obvious parallels with the natural world. Both parties, the rich and the poor, lose by their pact. Even parasitism (ugly though it is) has one of the pair thriving, whereas the prosperity that Bangladeshi exploiters enjoy requires constant vigilance to maintain (as any unnatural growth does) and is severely self limiting. The amount of non-productive effort actually needed to channel black money, intimidate underlings, outmanoeuvre opponents and bribe intermediaries probably outweighs the energy legitimate business would require. Moreover corruption's gains (such as they are) remain short term at long term cost since any society that relies on slave labour eventually topples into anarchy, revolution, or annexation. For now, poverty is carried by the poor while the wealthy consolidate their gains. The powerful remain comfortable with the powerless's lack of comfort. Life goes on; why should leaders trouble themselves with idealistic changes when the status quo is so rewarding? Tomorrow isn't their responsibility, surely?