

Seeing Like a Citizen – Vision of Shorkar

There is a paradox in Bangladesh: despite the inadequate and distorted forms of democratic practice, there exists considerable commitment and action to improve the lives of the poor on the part of public officials. Why should public officials care about development if the electorate cannot hold them to account for their action or inaction? The answer, we believe, lies in the role of grassroots development organizations, which have become key mediators between citizens and the state. Grassroots organizations relay local concerns and desires to the government, acting as something of a representative for the poor. They also provide services, acting as a surrogate for the government. This arrangement begs a question: how do citizens perceive the role of public officials and what is their perception about the state and their expectations from it?

BRAC Development Institute (BRAC University) set out to answer this question by conducting a survey that asked poor women and men in rural areas their views and opinions on citizenship, rights and the state. The aim of the research was to understand the mobilizing and mediating practices of grassroots development organizations and to explore the various avenues through which people gain a citizen consciousness and identity, assert their citizenship and strengthen their engagement with the state. A quantitative survey was conducted in the south-west districts of Bangladesh with 2400 women and men who were members of eight grassroots development organizations categorized into four main types - micro-credit, micro-credit plus other services, rights-based and labour-rights based organizations. Thus, the respondents of this survey represent the poorer segment of the rural population, and primarily poor women (78%).

The research revealed that while most see *shorkar* as a powerful, distant and inaccessible force, there is no single understanding of *shorkar*, nor is it viewed as a homogenous entity. For most people



PHOTO: ZIA ISLAM

National Parliament.

shorkar appears as a vague all-powerful individual or group of individuals, far removed from the people, to whom people have little access and over whom, even less influence. However, despite the distance and common mistrust in many government institutions, people also identify *shorkar* as a major force of change in their lives. People have expectations from this *shorkar* and some government institutions even enjoy a degree of trust from ordinary people. In addition, while the distant *shorkar* is powerful and inaccessible, the Union Parishad (local government body) is near, accessible and an institution people can relate to.

Perception of *shorkar*

In the Bangladesh context *shorkar* is a familiar and widely used term. Historically, *shorkar* was used to refer to the master/ landlord in feudal relations, connoting a powerful person to whom the powerless are submissive and look up to for favours.

How do people understand *shorkar* now?

- ▶ The most popular understanding of *shorkar* is a group of people who rule or administer the state or the “kingdom”. This perception is held by one-fourth of the people interviewed.
- ▶ Another group (more than a fifth) thinks of *shorkar* as an individual *raja* (king), ruler, president or the head of state.
- ▶ Both these groups refer to “kings” and “rulers” reflecting the ingrained notions of feudal relationships and together they constitute nearly half of the people interviewed.
- ▶ The meaning of *shorkar* as representing the people or as serving the people is given by less than a third of the respondents, and this perception was less among women than men.



PHOTO: ZIA ISLAM

Voters in queue.

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- ▶ A few feel that *shorkar* means powerful people who can do anything they wish, such as rich people and influential people.
- ▶ A few also equate *shorkar* with the names of past prime ministers.

Who is *shorkar*?

- ▶ Nearly half of the respondents (48%) see the prime minister or president, or even a minister as the *shorkar*.
- ▶ One-fourth identify *shorkar* as those elected by the people. More men than women identify *shorkar* in this manner.
- ▶ An individual rather than people's elected representative body is thus the overriding identity of *shorkar* in the eyes of people.
- ▶ Others identify *shorkar* variously as political parties, rich/powerful people, those who do government jobs, etc.
- ▶ The Union Parishad (UP) is not generally seen as *shorkar* (0.2% of respondents).
- ▶ A fair proportion (16%) cannot identify *shorkar*, of whom most are women.

Relating to *shorkar*

- ▶ *Shorkar* is seen to be far removed and since most people see *shorkar* as the ruler or king or prime minister who resides in the capital city of Dhaka they do not feel that they have access to *shorkar*.
- ▶ The Union Parishad is not seen to be part of this distant *shorkar*. A clear demarcation between them is evident from the way people spoke of their claims to *shorkar* and to the Union Parishad. While comparatively few men (26%), and very few women (8%) say they had made claims on *shorkar*, three-fourths of the men and half of the women admit to making demands on the Union Parishad.
- ▶ Again, claims to the *shorkar* are made collectively mainly through the NGO groups, while those to the Union Parishad are usually made in person. Thus the Union Parishad is more approachable, nearer to the people and less intimidating than the *shorkar*.



PHOTO: ZIA ISLAM

Upazila Parishad.



PHOTO: ZIA ISLAM

Union Parishad.

Knowledge of *shorkar*

One indicator of peoples' knowledge of *shorkar* is whether they can name members of the government such as the prime minister, members of parliament (MP), UP chairman, etc.

- ▶ National figures are known by nearly all. On average 97% men and 86% women correctly named the last prime minister and a political party. These figures and institutions are constantly named and discussed in the media and people are vigorously mobilized around them during the election process.
- ▶ 87% men and 53% women correctly named the head of the caretaker government, which did not come through elections and had come into power shortly before this survey was conducted. 10% men and 40% women did not know, while the rest were incorrect.
- ▶ Knowledge regarding local members of the government depends upon whether they reside locally and whether people need to go to them for any services or benefits. Thus 97% men and 86% women could correctly name the UP chairman and the male UP member who are in constant touch with people and to whom people go for benefits, demands, work and even conflict resolution.
- ▶ 57% men and 60% women correctly named the female UP member. 40% men and 36% women did not know, while the rest were incorrect. A female UP member has a larger constituency than male UP members, there being one female member in every three wards in contrast to a male UP member in every ward. More importantly, female UP members are not given responsibilities such as, distribution of relief, VGD/VGF cards or other government safety net programmes that provide work for the poor as a result of which people do not need to go to her and therefore know her.
- ▶ 92% men and 48% women correctly named the MP. But 6% men and 45% women did not know who the MP is. The MP is usually not a local resident, has little relation with the people of his/her constituency, far less so with women and plays no direct role in providing services or benefits.
- ▶ In all cases women were less likely to 'know' members of the *shorkar* than men, except in the case of the female UP member.

Trust in government institutions

Trust in institutions and in other people depends upon how much interaction people have with them. It is only when there is significant interaction that people can be clear about whether to trust or not. However it can work both ways: it may either increase trust or the reverse, i.e., generate greater mistrust. People's trust in government institutions and in elected representatives varies a lot.

Do people trust elected representatives?

- ▶ More than 70% men and women feel they can fully or partly trust the UP chairmen, UP male member and UP female member. Nevertheless one-sixth of men and women do not trust their local representatives. Since most men and women said they have interactions with these elected representatives, very few said that they do not know whether they trust them or not.
- ▶ Fewer (about half of respondents) partly or fully trust their local MP.
- ▶ Half of the women respondents do not know whether they trust the MP or not.

Do people trust political parties?

- ▶ People know about and have strong opinions regarding political parties. They did not hesitate to state their trust or mistrust.
- ▶ The Awami League came out as most trusted, supported by three-fourths of both men and women.
- ▶ Half of the people partly or fully trust the Bangladesh Nationalist Party
- ▶ The least trusted party was Jamaat-e-Islam Bangladesh, trusted by a third of the people.

Expectations from *shorkar*

People's notion of *shorkar* may be vague, distant and often inaccessible, but they are clear on what *shorkar* is supposed to do for them. Clearly, these are expectations from that distant, powerful *shorkar*. So, what do the people expect the government to do for them? People answered in forty different ways.

- ▶ 'Taking care of the poor' (providing food, clothing, shelter, basic amenities, employment, fair wages, relief, providing



PHOTO: SIMEEN MAHMUD

Children going to primary school.

agricultural inputs, *khas* resources, pensions and cash assistance, etc.) constitutes the most common expectation from *shorkar*.

- ▶ The role of *shorkar* in providing infrastructure (building roads, bridges, culverts, etc) was equally important.
- ▶ The expectation that *shorkar* would provide services (educational opportunities, scholarships, medical treatment, income generating training, business opportunities, loans, improve quality of treatment in government hospitals etc.) was held by one-third of the people.
- ▶ Another third relied upon *shorkar* to ensure rights and protect freedoms (end corruption, provide safety/ security, end terrorism, properly administer rural areas, provide justice, ensure citizen/ minority/ women's rights, give equal rights, assure voting rights, protect election vows, stop violence against women, stop dowry, reduce price of essentials, etc.)
- ▶ These expectations do not differ between men and women.

Shorkar as source of information, benefits and services

- ▶ The different members of government play a major role in providing information, such as UP chairmen and members, government school officials, government health workers or village *chowkidars*. Majority of both men and women obtain information from these sources. For women, however, neighbours and male family members are also important sources of information.
- ▶ About one-third of the respondents get information regarding new development projects in the area from government sources. This proportion is double (two-thirds) in the case of information on satellite clinics, old age/ widow pension, female secondary school stipend and VGD cards.
- ▶ More than two-thirds men and women access government health services for major illness and reproductive healthcare.
- ▶ Nearly three-fourths of households with primary school going children access government primary school education.
- ▶ About forty percent of both men and women also received at least one government benefit in the form of the safety nets (VGD/VGF cards, pensions) or school stipends.
- ▶ More women than men have also received livelihood/ skill training organized by government institutions.

Shorkar as force of change

Majority of both men and women interviewed asserted that there have been positive changes in their society and livelihoods in the last 10-15 years, whether in terms of improved social justice, increase in income earning opportunities, improved access to health and education services and a reduction in violence against women. For example, about 60% men and women said that the situation with regard to social justice has improved in the last 10-15 years; more than 90% said there has been improvement in opportunities for income earning and access to services and about 80% said that the situation of violence against women has improved. In many instances people said these changes have come about as a direct impact of government measures.



PHOTO: SIMEEN MAHMUD

Women at the Satellite Clinic for immunisation.

What has been the role of the government in bringing about these perceived positive changes?

- ▶ About one-third of men and women invoked the role of government in improving social justice, mainly through enacting laws and implementing these laws more rigorously. Government pressure on rural administration, a good/ aware UP chairman and members and most importantly educated and qualified judges were the reasons given by people for better implementation of laws. Corruption in the justice system, especially in the form of judges taking bribes, was seen as a major constraint to further improvement.
- ▶ The role of the caretaker government (during the rule of which the survey was carried out) was strongly emphasized with respect to the proper implementation of laws and inhibiting corrupt and violent practices.
- ▶ Nearly half (45%) identified improvement in communications (roads, bridges, etc.) and government programmes in making

access to irrigation, agricultural inputs leading to better use of agricultural land as major reasons for improvement in economic opportunities.

- ▶ The presence of more schools and health centres in rural areas and increase in the number of doctors was given as a major reason for increased access to education and health services. In this case, however, NGOs have also played a significant role. About half the men and women also indicated a greater role of government in terms of school stipend policies, performance of government health workers, better communication and administration and increased awareness and action of the UP chairmen and members of the area.
- ▶ The role of the government in terms of rigorous laws and implementation of such laws, taking positive measures and creating pressure and the awareness of the UP chairmen and members were identified by more than a third of men and women as factors in reducing violence against women. NGO activity was another force of change that people identified in this regard. Of those who said that the change has been negative, the increase in violence against women was attributed to women's increased voice and empowerment that men do not approve of.
- ▶ People's enhanced role and increased participation was also identified as a force of positive change. Examples of people's roles cited were: awareness regarding laws, inclination to work harder, increase in demand for education and quality healthcare, awareness of laws regarding violence against women particularly amongst women, women's greater voice and empowerment, participation in protest, women's income earning, less acceptance in communities of practices like child marriage, dowry, polygamy, etc.

Credits: This research brief was written by Kabita Chowdhury, Lopita Huq and Simeen Mahmud. It draws on their research on 'Deepening democracy, building citizenship and promoting participation' (2007) conducted at BRAC Development Institute, BRAC University in collaboration with the Development Research Centre (DRC) on Citizenship, Participation and Accountability, a network of researchers and activists from 8 countries across Asia, Africa, South America and the UK, located at the Institute of Development Studies, University of Sussex. Readers are encouraged to quote from the brief with due acknowledgement to the research and the institute. More information is available at www.bracdevelopmentinstitute.org and www.drc-citizenship.org. Email the Bangladesh Citizenship research team at citizenship@bracuniversity.ac.bd

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Additional resources: *Inclusive Citizenship: Meanings and Expressions*, Naila Kabeer (ed.) London: Zed Books (2005). *Rights, Resources and the Politics of Accountability*, Peter Newell and Joanna Wheeler (eds.) London: Zed Books (2006). *Spaces for Change? The Politics of Citizen Participation in New Democratic Arenas*, Andrea Cornwall and Vera Schattan Coelho (eds.), London: Zed Books (2007). 'Citizenship and Rights in Bangladesh' Simeen Mahmud (ed.), *The Bangladesh Development Studies*, Vol. XXIX. Sept-Dec 2003.

Glossary of Local Terms:

Shorkar: Government

Union Parishad: Union Council

Upazila Parishad: Sub-district Council

Khas resource: Unoccupied land legally owned by the government and managed by the Ministry of Land

Chowkidar: Messenger and security guard employed by the *Union Parishad*



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