

## REVIEW

# Village Leaders and Rural Development in Bangladesh

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### Abstract

A village committee was established to look after rural development activities that were initiated by joint efforts of villagers and staff members of the Joint Study on Rural Development Experiment (JSRDE) project team sponsored by JICA in Bangladesh. The committee was formed of the so-called traditional village leaders, or *matabbors*, some of whom proved to be active in enhancing villagers' unity and devotion to village public affairs. At the same time, a village coordination meeting of local government officers was formed to coordinate the activities of the government concerning rural development. The *Thana* (local administrative office) officer played pivotal roles in organizing the meeting. An effort was made to "link" the organizations of local governments and the village committee, so that the governments' rural development services were channeled into the village through a public, formal "door" of the village. Various trials implemented in the village indicated that successful linkage hinges upon the single facet of "openness" or "transparency" in information dissemination, which had been rather lacking in rural Bangladesh. The important processes of formulating the village committee and the village coordination meeting of local governments and clues for successful communication and dissemination of related information are documented in this paper. Moreover, analysis of an economic aspect of rural infrastructure reveals that bridge construction in the village was efficient in generating income for the poor.

**Discipline:** Agricultural economics

**Additional key words:** administrative service delivery, information transparency, people's participation, rural infrastructure, village committee

### Introduction

Existence of local leaders, or *matabbors*, has been negatively evaluated in the field of rural development in Bangladesh. Since poverty alleviation is the first priority of rural development programs<sup>6</sup>, program implementers believe that local leaders, most of them belonging to a

well-off group in the village, should be kept outside of the target population.

A characteristic of rural development programs aiming at people's participation implemented so far, is that most of their activities put stress on training, savings and credit, etc., which approach local people individually, and as a result programs requiring communal participation, such as construction of rural infrastructure, are rarely

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This paper reports the results obtained in the joint project with the Government of Bangladesh on "Joint Study on Rural Development Experiment (JSRDE)" during 1992 to 1995 sponsored by the Japan International Cooperation Agency. The paper is based primarily on our previous study entitled "*Matabbors* and Village Development: An Account of Action Research in Dakshin Chamuria Village, Bangladesh" (in Japanese) submitted to *Tonan Ajia Kenkyu*<sup>1</sup> and others<sup>2,3,4</sup>. However, large parts of the papers have been revised.

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included in their activities. It can be said that such programs require both the community consciousness of villagers and leadership for coordinating among villagers and across villages, yet such programs used to exclude the local leadership.

On the contrary, the basic approach of our trial, under the Joint Study on Rural Development Experiment (JSRDE) project funded by JICA from 1992 to 1995, in the village of Dakshin Chamuria (D village hereinafter), is to encourage local people's participation through positively adapting the rural society (Fig. 1). This is to say, to draw on the community consciousness of local people, by encouraging the function of local leaders as the motivators of local society. The concept of this approach has been developed through observations of various occurrences, in which *matabbors* played various roles, such as when villagers endeavor to protect their village from floods under their leadership, and their involvement in uniting villagers' actions for constructing village schools and bazaars, processing and distributing relief goods from government, etc.

Several activities have been tried in D village. A village committee was organized covering the whole village, and led by it, programs such as improvement of rural infrastructure have been planned and implemented. A village coordination meeting was organized, in which strengthening the linkage between government and villagers through services has been tried. This paper aims at examining the possibility of an alternative approach to

rural development, not putting emphasis on the economic improvement of individuals, which used to be the mainstream of rural development in Bangladesh, but emphasizing and encouraging communal unity of the villagers by the leadership of *matabbors*. In this paper, our trials for an alternative approach to rural development are introduced. At the same time, the paper analyzes an economic aspect of the rural infrastructure for transportation, namely a bridge, which was long-sought after by the villagers and built in the village.

### *Matabbor* and “public” in D village

Although we tend to imagine that local leaders must be elites endowed both with a superior economical condition and academic career, actually such conditions are not necessarily the prerequisites for being a *matabbor*. Among *matabbors*, there are those who have no more than 1 acre, or 0.4 ha, of land, and furthermore some of them are illiterate. Most of the *matabbors* are in their forties or above<sup>5</sup>.

*Matabbors* have never been elected in a village gathering or through a legal procedure, they are spontaneously acknowledged as *matabbors* by the villagers. Villagers explain that they acknowledge them as *matabbors* because “they belong to the well-off class in the village” or “they have been trained to be *matabbors* by their fathers who also used to be *matabbors*”, which does not, however, necessarily mean a *matabbor* position is regarded as hereditary. Becoming a *matabbor* is a question of knowing a wide range of information and being a good mediator with conversational skills. Among such qualities, eloquence is a prerequisite to be an influential *matabbor*.

*Matabbors* know much about the personal affairs of villagers, but they pay more attention to the public matters in the village. When they try to persuade villagers, they would often use phrases such as “society of the village” and “not for oneself, but for all villagers”. In this way, *matabbors* settle quarrels among villagers, or organize villagers for rural development work, trying to remind villagers of the community consciousness.

A good and important example of *matabbors* working for the sake of the public can be well observed in the village courts. The court at the village level is held several times in a year. There were 13 *matabbors* who participated in settling inter-village matters at the village court. *Matabbors* are entitled to serve as court mediators or judges by villagers. The principle that they should abide by the decision of the *matabbors* acknowledging they are made without selfish motives, has been cherished in the mind of villagers for generations. Generally, a court can be held several times in the case a quarrel can not be

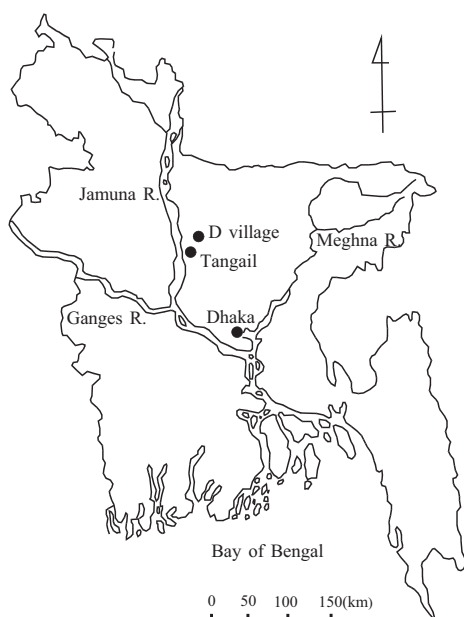


Fig. 1. Location of Dakhshin Chamuria (D) village

settled in one court. When it is complicated, *matabbors* from nearby villages are also invited as mediators, and if the village court becomes dead-locked, an odd number of *matabbors* are gathered for making a special discussion by majority. Court decisions are made by the mutual consent of all parties, and with the approval and public consent of the villagers even though legally they are not legitimately settled.

Besides functioning as mediators in village courts, *matabbors* function in contacting organizations outside the village such as government agencies, or NGOs who are implementing rural development programs. More than 70% of *matabbors* go to the local administrative office more than once a month. *Matabbors* actively gather useful information keeping in mind current trends in government, NGOs, and so forth. On the other hand, when outside organizations attempt to start some program in the village, they usually approach the *matabbors* for collecting useful information on the village. So *matabbors* can get various information earlier than other villagers and they can monopolize profitable information. It is often observed in the village that tricky *matabbors* act selfishly and monopolize profitable information, and such *matabbors* have been criticized as “touts” by those who are concerned with rural development programs.

When the abuse of *matabbors* privileges, such as monopolizing profitable information, becomes too unforgivable, villagers strongly protest against them. Some cases in the past indicated the importance of the penetration of information among villagers for checking the abuse of privilege by *matabbors*.

## Action programs in D village

### 1. Establishment of the village committee

*Matabbors* demonstrate their leadership when villagers face problems which require unity of the villagers for solution. On such occasions, *matabbors* act as the authority of the village appealing to the community interest of the villagers. When *matabbors* act only for their own interest, they have the tendency to become touts, and we know that it is a simple but very effective way to prevent such a liability by making everybody aware of useful information that tends to be monopolized by *matabbors*. Thus, the village committee was established in D village to make *matabbors* reveal information and discuss their opinions in person in front of the villagers.

A village in Bangladesh usually consists of several small communities called ‘*para*’. D village has 4 communities and each of these has several *matabbors*. To set up a village committee, a general meeting was held in the classroom of the primary school in the village on January



Photo 1. Village committee meeting

2, 1993. The selection of the *matabbors* as committee members was carried out during this meeting by about 200 people from all communities. *Matabbors* from each community were selected according to the number of households in each community. The committee had 18 members including 4 females, 1 from each community. Other procedures included the selection of the executing body, a chairman and secretaries on the basis of the villagers’ recommendation (Photo 1).

The village committee is assumed to fulfill the following 3 main functions: (1) to hold a monthly meeting for discussing the common problems, (2) to prepare programs for possible solutions, (3) to hold a coordination meeting (see next section) with the field assistants of the rural development agencies, the government and NGOs.

The village committee works as the contact point for the reception and negotiation with organizations outside the village, which used to be handled personally by *matabbors*, in addition to functions such as identification and guidance of development activities in the village, coordination of villagers’ problem, and so forth. The village committee is the representative and the authority of the village, and all programs would be implemented through the approval of the committee.

### 2. Village coordination meeting for government service delivery

Various administrative services in the fields of agricultural extension, public health, fishery, livestock, etc., are supplied in the villages of Bangladesh. Those who are in charge of delivering the services to the villagers are field assistants who go around villages and local administrative officers who are in charge of supervision of the field assistants. Their work starts by contacting the *matabbors* who function as their guides in the villages, and continues as a personal relationship. Transfer of the services to the villagers through *matabbors* can be observed in the process of selecting contact farmers for agricultural exten-

sion service programs, establishment of governmental cooperatives, receiving subsidies from government, receiving relief goods, etc. In the process, *matabbors* select themselves or those who are personally intimate as the beneficiaries of the services, and others in the general population of the village would not be informed of the existence of such services until they see someone selected who is receiving the services and they often even do not know that services have been delivered.

When thinking of the linkage between government service and villagers, it is important not only to give anyone an equal chance to access the services who wants them but also to have a counter system for conveying villagers' needs to the officers. In addition, the system should be the one that fosters the community consciousness of the villagers, since our approach of rural development is based on it. Hence, the village coordination meeting was also established so that the villagers can get the information of service delivery directly from the field assistants and so that the villagers can indicate their needs.

The meeting is managed by the secretariat of village committee chaired by local administrative officer. All members of the village committee and the representatives from the unit of homestead out of two to four huts, are invited. Seven field assistants from each service section, a field worker from NGO, a secretary, and a member of the union council attend the meeting. The meeting is held every first Thursday, each field assistant and worker reports what he/she did last month, and informs the village of the schedule and content of services that will be delivered in coming month along with other important topics.

Information addressed in the meeting is printed in a paper, and distributed to the villagers. It is a simple information paper with only one or two pages edited in the project office. They are put on the notice boards installed in each community, school yard and bazaar, as well as delivered to the villagers by circular notice.

Visits of field assistants and workers had not been well known to the villagers before the program started, but with the facilitation of service delivery system by the meeting, circular notice, and notice boards, the villagers developed the ability to approach the field assistants more easily. For example, a livestock assistant gave the vaccination to cattle amounting to 100 on September 1993, whose activity used to be seldom known to the villagers before. Governmental services have come to be visible to the villagers.

## Economics of infrastructure building

### 1. *Matabbors* working for *hat* establishment and bridge construction

Villagers who had to go off shopping far out of D village had wanted to establish a *hat*, or weekly market, in their own village for a very long time. Establishment of a *hat* was first proposed by one of the influential *matabbors* of the village in 1986. He called on seven nearby villages' *matabbors* and proposed to them to hold a *hat* in the prayer yard on the western border of D village. *Matabbors* of each village returned to their village, and discussed about it and they gathered again. On the next meeting, establishment of a *hat* was decided and a committee for discussing necessary issues was organized. In this way, the *hat* started in D village under the leadership of plural villages' *matabbors*, and it is held in the afternoon every Saturday. The *hat* has been developed gradually, and stalls of groceries, a dispensary, and a barber are standing at present and many people gather from neighboring villages. Foresight and insight of *matabbors* for the impact of the *hat* on the rural economy seemed to be proved.

There were broken-down sections on the road which interrupted the traffic from the highway to D village in the rainy season. As the *hat* opened and the marketplace of D village was a breath of life to the villagers, the village committee, namely *matabbors*, decided to request that the government construct a bridge on the longest broken-down section to allow van-rickshaws carrying burdens and people to the *hat* to come and go freely even in the rainy season. It was requested that vehicles could come at the bridge smoothly from the highway along the road for a bridge construction by the government. It was necessary to level the road and set culverts on two broken-down sections, one was in the neighboring village, by the villagers themselves. Accordingly, *matabbors* of D village were busily engaged to collect contributions and pro bono work for land elevation showing their own volunteer works, and persuaded the owners to provide their land in order to set culverts. Moreover, they negotiated with the *matabbors* of the neighboring village to repair the road in their village. As the result of their enormous efforts, finally, the 15 m concrete bridge was constructed during the JSRDE period.

### 2. Economical assessment of the *hat* and bridge

The authors estimated the economic impact of the infrastructure by a *hat* survey and the number of van-rickshaws before bridge construction. The neighboring village, which is accessible to the highway directly, had 18 van-rickshaws used for transporting commercial goods to the *hat* and D village only 7. Therefore, the new infra-

**Table 1. Cost and benefit of estimated impact of the bridge**

Earning by a van-rickshaw per month (Tk.)	Total earning in a year by 11 van-rickshaws (Tk.)	Total cost of the bridge (Tk.)	Annual cost of the bridge (average of 30 years) (Tk.)
1,000	132,000	750,000	25,000
1,200	158,400		

1 dollar = 65 Tk.

**Table 2. The estimated impact of the weekly *hat* by numbers of total participants including small merchants surveyed on three occasions**

Condition	Bad communication Rainy season Aug. 17, 1994	Good communication Dry season Jan. 7, 1995	Highest potential Just before Eid festival Feb. 26, 1995
Person (No.)	1,946	2,941	4,198
Villages (No.)	32	34	43
Buying capacity	2,000 person 10 Tk./person 4 <i>hat</i> /month 80,000 Tk./month	3,000 person 10 Tk./person 4 <i>hat</i> /month 120,000 Tk./month	4,000 person 10 Tk./person 4 <i>hat</i> /month 160,000 Tk./month
(Per season)	480,000 Tk./6 months	720,000 Tk./6 months	960,000 Tk./6 months

1 dollar = 65 Tk.

structure has the potentiality in increasing the number of van-rickshaws by 11. The estimated impact of the bridge is shown in Table 1. The table explains the good prospect of investment for infrastructure development in D village. As total cost of the bridge was 750,000 Tk., 1 dollar equals 65 Tk., the annual cost is simply calculated to be 25,000 Tk. if the life of the bridge is 30 years. This cost is seemingly somewhat big. However, the increased 11 van-rickshaw pullers can earn 132,000 Tk. to 158,400 Tk. annually. They are a low-income group but they are considered to be small entrepreneurs. This indicates that the development of infrastructure with a long term perspective has a good prospect for the development of small entrepreneurship among the poor. So the credit loan programs to the poor should be implemented in accordance with the infrastructure programs.

The annual cost of 25,000 Tk. should be collected from the direct beneficiaries and a subsidy of the central government fund. At the weekly *hat* about 200 small merchants gather to sell their goods and so the 218 persons (18 van-rickshaw pullers and 200 small merchants) will use the bridge directly. If they would pay subscription of only 2 Tk. for bridge per week, the total subscription per year amounts to 22,672 Tk. Only the remaining 2,328 Tk. is to be supported by a subsidy of the central government.

The direct impact of infrastructure of the bridge can be estimated in terms of the number of participants to the

weekly *hat* as shown in Table 2. The table indicates that the income in the rainy season from the *hat* would increase 240,000 Tk., balance of two seasons, due to good road communication. The maximum potential of the *hat* is considered on participants of the *hat* just before Eid festival. If we develop the *hat* to the maximum potential, volume of trade transacted can amount to be double of the rainy season. During the rainy season, work in the village, namely making local cigarettes, handloom and agricultural labor decrease due to the weather condition. Therefore, the *hat* is the only facility to the poor which offers opportunity of income generation by selling something or transporting goods. The *hat* development program must be given top priority for poverty alleviation in rural Bangladesh.

## Conclusion

The characteristics of our approach tried in D village is that we placed existing rural society as the supporter of the rural development, not thinking of introducing new organization such as cooperatives or target groups. Experiences of rural development in the village taught us that it is local leaders, namely *matabbors*, who can draw full participation by villagers for rural development program.

The *hat* establishment and bridge construction program revealed the additional importance of *matabbors* as



coordinators externally. As the impact of infrastructure building spreads over several villages, the importance of discussion among *matabbors* in the area could increase rather than decrease. Here, we feel the needs for recognizing the function of *matabbors* to communicate with each other among the villages. Consequently, it is our alternative method for rural development to recognize the authority of *matabbors*, which has been denied in the field of rural development in Bangladesh, and bring out their abilities in the village and functions as coordinators in the locality. Establishment of the village committee aims at the systematic approach considering such a point of view.

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