

The Role of Elites in Economic Development
The Reality of Bangladesh

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February 2009

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Table of Contents

Introduction3

Emergence of elites.....4

Perceptions and Character of the Identified group towards Socio Economic Development5

 1) Business Elites5

 2) Political Elites6

 3) Professional Elites.....6

 4) Educational Elites8

 5) Media (print and electronic) Elites8

What are the imperfections within the elite’ societal legacy?9

Recommendations10

Conclusion.....10

Work cited.....10

Introduction

The term Elite is originally from the Latin, *eligere*, which means "to elect". The elites are a relatively small dominant group within a large society, which enjoys a privileged status in comparison to other individuals' status in the society. The word Elite was used in seventeenth century to describe commodities of particular excellence; and the usage was later extended to refer to superior social group. In the English language the earliest known use of Elite, according to the Oxford English Dictionary is in 1823, at which time it was already applied to social groups. In the Treatise on General Sociology (1915-19) Vilfredo Pareto defined elite in two different ways. He began with a very general definition:

Let us assume that in every branch of human activity each individual is given an index which stands as a sign of his capacity, very much the way grades are given in various subjects in examinations in school. The highest type of lawyer, for instance, will be given 10. The man who does not get a client will be given 1, reserving zero for the man who is an out-and-out idiot. To the man who has made his millions- honestly or dishonestly as the case may be, we will give 10. To the man who has earned his thousands we will give him 6; to such as just manage to keep out of poor-house 1, keeping Zero for those who get in.....And so on for all the branches of human activity. So let us make a class of the people who have highest indices in their branch of activity, and to that class give the name of elite. (pp. 1422-3).

This definition serves merely to emphasize the inequality of individual endowment in every sphere of social life, and as the starting point for a definition of the governing elite. The position of elite at the top of the social strata almost invariably puts it in a position of leadership and often subjects the holders of elite status to pressure to maintain their position as part of the elite. However, in spite of the pressures, the existence of the elite social stratum is usually unchanged. Based on the social equilibrium and to initiate the discussion flow, we will divide the population into two stratum. 1) A lower stratum; the non elites; which will not be discussed in this paper and are not much influential in society as well as on government 2) A higher stratum; the elites, which is divided into two: i) a governing elite ii) a non-governing elite, these are the prime topic, based on which the discussion will evolve.

This paper will proceed based on general conceptual, theoretical and empirical issues relating to elites and their roles in socio-economic & political stratum in Bangladesh. This paper first explores the emergence of elites and their different categories. Second, it tries to understand the perceptions and character of the identified group towards socio economic aspect of the emerging national interest and at last concluding by identifying the imperfections with strong recommendations for necessary implementation in order to attain a highly morale & balanced civil society contributing towards sustainable economic development.

Emergence of elites

Bangladesh is in Southern Asia, bordering India and Burma and the Bay of Bengal. The country is densely populated, highly traditional and agrarian, with a thin veneer of modernity. It has a small urban elite and rudimentary political culture. Compared with other developing countries, Bangladesh is religiously, linguistically, and socially homogeneous. Of a population of 127,567,000 (1998 estimate), 98 per cent are Bengalis, with small minorities of indigenous group.

During the British colonial period, zamindars controlled huge estates as if they were their personal kingdoms. With the abolition of zamindar tenure in 1950, a new local elite of rich Muslim peasants developed. The members of the new elite owned far less land than the zamindars had once possessed, but they were able to feed their families well, sell surplus produce, send their children to school and then for higher education, and form new links with the bureaucracy of East Pakistan and later Bangladesh. In the colonial and Pakistani periods, local leaders were old men, but the trend since independence is for younger men to head factions as well. The heart of the local elder's authority is his control over land and the ability to provide land or employment to poorer villagers, who are often his kin. Land control may be an ancient prerogative, stretching back to the zamindars, or it may be the result of gradual purchases since independence. These elders with their influential status based on financial solvency and seniority advantage remained as rural elites with a kinship with their younger generation, who are the highly educated segment of the society, settled in metropolitan areas and also in some instances been able to positioning themselves in international arenas.

One of the outstanding characteristics of the urban leadership is its relatively short history. In the late 1980s, it was clear that many had emerged from middle-class or rich peasant backgrounds since 1947 or, in many cases, since 1971. Most retained close links with their rural relatives, either locally or elsewhere. Urban elites included professional politicians of national parties, and the entire social group that made up the urban leadership—military, professional, administrative, religious, and business personnel—who are directly or indirectly in a position of influencing the national politics and in terms accountable for socio-economic movement of the nation.

We will get another perspective of the origin of the urban elites, cited by Naomi Hossain in her IDS working paper 83, which says; *'A very small educated elite, connected by family and friendship, tends to dominate the decision-making process in Bangladesh' (cited in Lewis, Sobhan and Jonsson 1994: 17). Even the most casual of observations confirms the existence of a small and tightly-knit network of prominent people. Within our own sample we discovered that there were three siblings whom we had not initially known to be related to each other: a senior politician, a prominent academic, and a civil servant. 'Everyone knows everyone here' is a phrase commonly used by the elite to describe this circle. This is an elite group highly concentrated in one city, Dhaka, and with relatively weak rural ties (sees Siddiqui et al 1991; Khan et al 1996). In addition to the close-knit nature of this group, many of the elite circulate between elite professional groups. Khan et al (1996) notes*

that 70% of their sample of political elites were in business, with the highest concentration in the two major parties. As we found during our interviews, a member of the elite may be a former minister, a former civil servant, a published academic, and a journalist. An MP could also own a magazine, a manufacturing concern, and an NGO or charity organisation, while being a member of the social elite.....'

To progress with our discussion we will cascade these different originated elites into a broader horizon with specific categories based on their socio-economic activity, which have their representation in both the two groups of governing & non-governing elites.

In elite theory as developed by Marxist political scientists like Michael Parenti, all sufficiently large social groups will have some kind of elite group within them that actively participates in the group's political dynamics. But in context of socio political environment of Bangladesh, these groups also play a vital role in the nation's political arena in addition to influencing their own group's political dynamics. For ease of our discussion we will define the elites group as 1) Business Elites 2) Political Elites 3) Professional Elites 4) Educational Elites 5) Media (print and electronic) Elites.

Perceptions and Character of the Identified group towards Socio Economic Development

1) Business Elites

Business elites are the major influential group with immense economic contribution to the national economy in a developing country like Bangladesh, and in a way having the power of manipulating the socio-political agendas of the nation. Though the business elites are very much aware of the interdependence of social groups and realize that the elite are, to some extent, responsible for the poor, still they use these as a tool to secure their respect & position in the society, doing very little for the poor or the dependent social groups, in contrast to their enormous ability. Their possessed wealth is access to material resources, in the form of natural resources, capital (money) and credit. This Business Elites being blessed with fortunes is not sincerely concern about the socio-economic development as they maintain their concern in governing national policies up to their own need-base only. Either to get nominations from the political parties as a status quo or to influence policymakers in favor of their business gain. They believe direct poverty alleviation should be motivated by moral rather than ideological, class, or party-political concerns, and should be conducted within the framework of personal charity or 'civil society' (including NGOs). Those a few who priorities the nation's interest, in the long run are left aside by the political elites as not being gaining much financial benefits from the initiatives of the elites, and thus this elite group become ineffective in influencing the governments policy dynamics. The distribution of wealth is a central feature of social inequality helping to flourish the elitism & egoism, which we are by passing now for later discussion. The Psychological dilemma found in Business elites

is being selfish on dispense of others and being very opportunistic. As a capitalist, they are based on free markets, and this freedom implies survival of the fittest. Therefore competition becomes a form of life of the Elites forcing the weak to suffer in a competitive society ruled by money. If the perception of the Business elites can be changed from competition to collaboration, a merger between the different social groups and the elites can be dreamt, which will lead towards a socio-economic equilibrium.

2) Political Elites

Since Independence in 1971, Bangladesh politics is the bifurcation of two distinct political hemispheres: Both of them originated from family inheritance only, claiming their identity as Political elites. The favoritism of the majority citizens towards these leaders is mostly based on trust. They put their trust on the political elites upon the commitments made by the leaders and the philanthropy works shown to portray their benevolent and compassionate personality. The citizens take them to the governing power of the nation. Afterwards, being elected these Political Elites fail to bring a good governance and good democracy which is the basic necessity for economic development. Political affiliation of the government administration has transported, reduced independence of the judiciary; failure of Parliament committees to ensure accountability of the ministries and also ineffective system of making public servants accountable to citizens. This is due to absence of patriotism and strong political will along with petty party interests, politicization of public institutions, non cooperation among political parties in power and opposition and so on. On the other hand the non-governing political elites focus on finding the wrong steps of the ruling party without proposing any mitigation plans or corrective measures. The ruling party remains more busy with confronting opposition one, so does the opposition party. Facing confrontation and retorting it from both position and opposition becomes the main feature of the political arena, and that leaves a very narrow scope for a vibrant civil society to emerge for the need of economic stability. This makes the parliamentary power most unsuccessful in fulfilling its objective towards gearing the nation towards a development paradigm. In most cases the hunger of power and worldly benefits become the culprit in the path of upholding responsibilities and commitments of these political elites.

3) Professional Elites

According to Professor Harold Perkin's paper, 'The Third Revolution. Professional Elites in the Modern World'; *Any society in which the dominant elite is not recruited by hereditary title, inherited wealth, or personal wealth amassed from entrepreneurial profits, is by definition a professional society. This is a broad definition which nets a mixed catch of fish. The ruling elite may be composed of old style professionals from the liberal professions of church, law, and medicine, or from the newer professions in similar mould which grew from the needs of urban and industrial society - engineers, architects, surveyors, teachers, for example - or from bureaucrats whose special education and supposed commitment to the public service placed them in the same camp, or it can be composed of career politicians, themselves of extremely varied social, occupational, and*

*educational backgrounds,, of the chief executives and directors of major manufacturing, financial, commercial, and service concerns, people who by and large are 'professional' in the same sense that a professional footballer or cricketer are professional elites.....*We will add the professionals serving in NGOs in Development sector to this group also.

The Professional elites in private sectors are contributing towards economy from their respective field of expertise by considerably taking part in human capital development and also directly contributing to the revenue of the nation as sincere tax payers. This group does not accord poverty as a high priority on the national development agenda, nor do they view direct poverty alleviation as the responsibility of the state. Like the Business elites the professional elites also think, this should be conducted within the framework of personal charity or 'civil society' (including NGOs). The redistribution of assets does not also seem to them as a significant role in reducing poverty and in terms creating a sustainable and balanced economy. On the other side, the Bureaucrats are mostly tainted by partisan influence. It is very unfortunate that this Public Service Commission sectors in Bangladesh are mostly divided in political line and serve the interest of the political parties.

The central role played by professional elites in the definition of the moral orders of the profession and in the construction of professional ideologies. The moral order of the professions, defined and enforced by the elites, does not reflect the interest of all segments of professions; rather it serves to enhance the dominant position and interest of the elite itself. Through their control of the major professional associations, elite groups have been able to impose their definition of the profession on the occupational collectivity as a whole.

The high profile professional elites of influential policy advocacy think-tank organization are in rhetoric but the professionals are not truly close to peoples' lives and aspirations with minimum dignity. They do not spent time in villages or in a typical rural homestead to know the reality of the lower ranking people livelihood and understand the nature of poverty. Thus all ideas and programs coming from these elites fail as they are not filtered through the enthusiasm and participation of the common people of the country. Only a drastic and explicit change in mind-set can help to improve this scenario.

In the NGO sector also development initiatives taken by the high profiled professional elites are mostly targeted to fulfill the donor's criteria in order to get the fund. The policy implications of Bangladesh elite perceptions are congruent with those of most aid donors and international financial institutions: Language borrowed from international aid policy discourses often serves to justify beliefs about the nature, causes of and solutions to poverty that could equally well be expressed in 'traditional' idioms of personal charity. Thus a poverty focus is itself constructed as problematic, as it fosters dependence and does not promote the capabilities of the people. NGOs are criticized as having 'capitalized on the poverty issues', and perhaps in reaction to such criticism, some professional elites of this sector stressed that their organizational focus was empowerment, rather than poverty reduction through service provision. Similar debates are well developed

within NGO and academic circles and while they find faint echoes among other members of the elite, seem to be increasingly marginalized. The elite itself is relatively homogenous, as are their views about poverty. But there are some diversity. Some of the less orthodox – in particular some Professional elites in NGOs and activists who see their role as organizing the poor to pressurize the government for action – do represent a challenge to the status quo, but one which in the current ideological climate is muted.

4) Educational Elites

In Bangladesh socio-economic culture the educational elites are very highly honored but are very lowly considered in influencing national policy dynamics. A university professor, being an intellectual, should enjoy enough prestige more than, or at least similar to, a political leader. But here, his intellectual capability and leadership role in the intellectual milieu is bogged down unless he subscribes to or is submerged in a particular political party. He can not dictate, but unfortunately is dictated by, politics and its elites; though in most cases the professor himself is more capable than the political leader. Thus the Educational elites are very rarely allowed to stand out with access to governing authority in national policy implementation level.

5) Media (print and electronic) Elites

The media refers to channels of mass communications such as the radio, newspapers, television and the internet. The media has power over all of us to a greater or lesser extent. In Bangladesh the high profile intellectuals and business elites are mainly dominating this sector as being either the entrepreneur or the Chief Executive. Print and Electronic media has been playing an important role for social awareness building and also has a role in disclosing the ill practices of the government officials in a limited scale. Media should be more active by pressurizing the politicians and public service holders in different ways i.e. building social awareness, initiating different types of dialogues. Those who control channels of mass communication can strongly influence what the people believe. But the newspapers and satellite TV channels are mostly owned by the elites who are disgracefully thin-skinned, defensive about even legitimate criticism of being politically biased and for willful distortion of information dissemination. Few often sensitive socio economic crimes are suppressed through journalistic crimes of omission and commission. And even when the reporting is solid, which is rare enough, news organizations do not follow up in appropriate ways. In practice, activism is found in very few cases, where relentless campaigning is done to point out what's going wrong, and demanding corrective action from those who can do something about it. Despite of being unable to fulfill the sacred responsibilities towards the community still the media is highly sophisticated and relies on modern digital technology which has made them compete in the international arena. Acknowledging the power of technology, and using the resources available to their advantage, the media elites now need to come out with an energized visionary plan towards making a participative ideological society.

What are the imperfections within the elite' societal legacy?

With reference to the above discussion, the main message sensed that, there are some humane norms & values which are absent or ignored by this certain class. Important human traits, such as honesty, intellectuality, integrity, sincerity etc. get less value, while political affiliation and closeness to political leaders and bureaucracy become a huge market currency. People gradually run after this political currency, and leave the essential traits, which are of paramount need for development and progress of a nation.

The French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre worked on the philosophy of interpersonal relations. One of his observations was that we as human beings often have a tendency to try to get power over other human beings. Instead of seeing the other as an equal human being, we try to impose our own mind on the other, so that a mental, interpersonal power-structure can exist. This becomes a kind of master-slave relation at the psychological level. In a competitive, elitist society such relations are more easily created than in a slightly less competitive society. Power is the ability to alter others' behavior, either by coercion or deference (Wrong, 1988; Mann, 1984). The powerful, often elites with political or economic power, or both, can have access to resources denied the powerless.

There are both virtues and vices of elitism. Elitism is the view that some people belong to elites while others do not. Elitism order people in in-groups and out-groups; either you are in or not; either you have certain status symbols or you don't. In elite societal, there is no welfare system which secures an egalitarian social structure, thus capitalism directly or indirectly supports social hierarchy. If we believe that all human beings are of equal value, there is no way to accept the elitism. When the economic differences are very great in a society, people want to move upwards on the social ladder. This seems to create elitism, because it is when one belongs to the elite so that one can have privileges and material comfort. Elitism says better-than not being-with; it is a most destructive value. Elitism is one of the most subtle kinds of evil that exist, it means looking down on other people because of lack of money, social status or lack of education. Elitism is a key trait of racism, fascism and nationalism,

Informal norms are the unwritten, and sometimes unspoken, rules that govern human behavior. Informal norms are delivered to children as they are socialized; as we age, we continue to acquire expertise regarding structure and function of our social interactions. We are often unaware of informal norms until they have been violated. In this connection, Philosophers have come up with many suggestions as to what defines true morality. Different aspects of important humane qualities which are extremely needed to be cultured within the society are empathy, equal respect for all human beings, as well as caring about others, and not just oneself. These are the call for the elites to become an active segment in creating social equilibrium. Be it from secularist view or religious aspect, to serve for the humanity and to strive to establish social justice with equal rights irrespective of cast and creed, is the ultimate warfare for all our endeavors. This is the norm for basic development of humanity and society. Based on this value if a society starts its journey with its entire

fragment it is sure to achieve social equilibrium. This is where the virtues of the elites can be amalgamated into the national interest and economic development can be ignited.

Recommendations

- Towards a balance society, the major obstacle is lack of economic security. This saps energy for playing public roles, since many people are struggling to make ends meet; People cannot see what they can contribute, since the problems are so vast, people feel voiceless. To hear their voice in policy making initiatives, a decentralized governance system is of urgent need, which is now urban and elite based.
- People with influence in civil society tend to stress more strategic governance. The state should take on a co-ordination role and decentralize its responsibility for decisions to become transparent, weeding out corruption, and focus on implementing policies to reduce poverty for economic way forward.
- Media and elite society should be more active to pressurize the government to undertake necessary steps for reforms in public administration & de-politicize the civil society.
- Investment in low-cost labor intensive export industries should be prioritized, so that business elite become more reliant on the labor of the poor. This reliance on the poor will bring them into sharper policy focus.
- Companionship and authentic being-with-others should be cultured based on dialogue and discourse, not competition within a social hierarchy.

Conclusion

The Elites are always in an advantageous situation in every society with their prominence and lofty economic status drawing envy and resentment from the lower classes and the counter-elite. Acknowledging the characteristics of the elites, this paper has strategically expressed interest to absorb the elite class very strongly into socio- economic development policy, governing national interest, by advocating the suggestive morale and ethical values along with policy consensus which is to be exerted to turn this immense potential social segment into a rudimentary stakeholder of the socio-economic stability of the nation.

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