

Role of Culture in Decision Making Approach in Bangladesh: An Analysis from the Four Cultural Dimension of Hofstede

Bipasha Dutta*

[Abstract : The inherited administrative culture of Bangladesh is characterized by centralized top down approach. In spite of the administrative reforms to ensure participation and decentralized structure, traditional decision making approach dominates in Bangladesh. In this backdrop, by using literature review the paper argues that social culture influences administrative culture to retain the hierarchy based centralized structure that results in information based decision making approach and less participation of the stakeholders. By using the four cultural dimensions developed by Hofstede, the paper reveals that cultural dimension contributes to form the rationale behind decision making of government of Bangladesh. Also, the cultural norms determine the level of participation of the stakeholders and at the same time the level of participation contributes to perpetuate the existing informal norms.]

Key Words : Administrative Culture, Bangladesh, Decision Making, Social Culture, Participation

Introduction

Inherited administrative tradition of Bangladesh shows a leaning toward centralized decision making structure. However, age of decentralization put more emphasis on ensuring efficiency in decision making through participatory approach rather than following traditional centralized structure. Bangladesh also could not avoid the domain of the paradigm shift. However, social cultures still indispensably influence the administrative culture of Bangladesh and thus thwart the shift from centralized structure to participatory decentralized approach. Influences of social culture have been analysed from the four dimensions of culture developed by Hofstede (1991).

Culture and symbol shape institution and organization. At the same time, organizations are reshaped by the change in rules, normative systems

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- Bipasha Dutta, National Urban Specialist, World Vision Bangladesh, Dhaka, E-mail: bipasha5767@yahoo.com

and cognitive believes (Powel and DiMaggio, 1991). Weber and Hsee (2000) showed the role of culture and phycology in decision making approach. They also emphasized that cultural determinants of decision making has always been considered with low attention. Hofstede (1991) emphasized the cultural dimensions from social perspective. Following sections reveals the characteristics of inherited administrative culture in Bangladesh; influence of social culture in administrative culture and the decision making approach in Bangladesh.

Methodology

The study is based on secondary data. Different national, international journals, books and published reports have been used as data source. By using the theoretical lenses developed by Hofstede (1991) the study explores the impact of social culture on level of participation in the decision making approach.

Key Concepts

There has been a shift of ideas from government to governance (Peters and Pierre 1998, 2000; Rhodes, 1996,97) indicates involvements of stakeholders rather the centralized structure in central government. In decision making approach in case of Bangladesh government also recognize the need of participation of the stakeholders. Stakeholders are organized group of people who have common stake or interests in a common issue (Grimbel and Wellard, 1997). Mitchell (1997) identify stakeholder on the basis of legitimacy, urgency and proximity. In the decision making approach of Bangladesh government, the potential stakeholders could be the citizens, local government, donors, research organizations, media, different service providing agencies, vulnerable groups, private sectors, civil society organizations, academicians etc. Level of participation may also vary depending on the context. According to Arnstein (1969), ladder of participation follows a chronological order. 1. Manipulation 2. Therapy 3. Informing 4. Consultation 5. Placation 6. Partnership 7. Delegated power 8. Citizen Control.

The first two steps (Manipulation and Therapy) have been categorised as non participation where the level of participation is almost nonexistent. The later three steps (Informing, Consultation and Placation) have been assigned as token participation. In these phases, though the participation is evident, is not very effective. The Last three stages (Partnership, Delegation of Power and Citizen Control) promote an active level of participation. The ladder of participation also denotes the relationship between power and participation. The ladder denotes that only receiving information is not the

effective participation. Effective participation involves effective negotiation and actively taking part in the whole process. However, the decision making approach of Bangladesh government.

For instance, policy making in Bangladesh still follows a top down approach (Aminuzaman, 2000). Generally for any policy making government formulates a committee. A draft is prepared and presented at the meeting of the committee. The draft is provided to the relevant ministry for recommendations and improvements (Koehlmoos, Rashid, Rahman, Cravioto and Hanney, 2009). Also, donor countries impose their agenda in the policy formulation process. Thus, citizens have very limited room for involvement (Ayers, 2011). The policies and programmes are paper based and are characterized by limited implementation due to lack of stakeholders' participation (Khan and Rahman, 2006).

Existing social culture like power distance and uncertainty avoidance play a vital role in limiting the participation of the stakeholders in this process.

Historical Overview in Bangladesh: Administrative Culture

The concept of administrative culture is abstract not a concrete and it is a collective ascription of society (Khan, 1990). The unequal centralized structure and domination of elite in the administrative culture and is inherited from British and Pakistan era in Bangladesh who involved in the whole governance and policy framework for problem identification, agenda setting, implementation and evaluation. The domination of British and Indian culture is visible in the administrative culture of Bangladesh that inherited its culture of centralization, nepotisms and hierarchy (Haque and Mohammad, 2013). Inclination for self preservation, domination of policy making structure and propensity to maintain clientalism has also achieved as part of the inherent culture. During British period, the bureaucrats controlled the entire local government unit with no scope of people's participation (Zafarullah and Khan, 1994:645).

Anupam Sen (2009) argued that in the colonial period the bureaucratic military state apparatus was overdeveloped because it had to exercise domination over the native social classes.

This centralized structure conflicted with the indigenous social values and norms and were unable to meet the need of the local people. Laws made with good intention and sound information still could not fulfil the demand. After independence in 1971, there was a need for administrative reforms for increasing poverty, unemployment, liberalization, fall in real income – characterized by patron client relationship (Zafarullah, 2013).

The First Awali League (AL) Regime of Bangladesh was characterized by highly centralized structure. The support base of AL was mainly the rural people of Bangladesh. Thus, they avoided any major reform and change in rural areas to maintain their support base under socialism (Umar 1987, Huque 1988; Khan, 2001). In 1975, single party presidential system replaced the multi party system. The districts were headed by the governor directly appointed by the president. (Khan,2001)

Military ruled demined from 1975 to 1990 where powers were concentrated in the hands of army. From 1971 to 1990, decision making approach was highly centralized in Bangladesh and followed technical approach of decision making to reconstruct the war destructed economy of Bangladesh. From 1991 democracy established as Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP) held power. In 1991 BNP was elected. With the change in government from military to democracy, no significant change or reforms were initiated in the governance process (Khan, 2001). However, in the democratic regime, economy opened up and the influence of market increased. In 1996, AL government came in power. After that one of two major political parties of Bangladesh (BNP and AL) was elected in a democratic process. However, no major governance reforms or communicative shifts were visible. Still power is centralized (Haque and Mohammad, 2013). Siddiqui (1994) identified four major characteristics of local governance in Bangladesh

1. Domination of central government
2. Inadequate mobilization of resources
3. Limited participation
4. Superficial commitment of decentralization practice

Room for lower officials to exercise power and citizens participation were created from the decades of 90s. Still, public officials were inclined to maintain hierarchy and reluctant about public needs (World Bank, 1996). In the name of official rules most of the government officials behave unfairly to the common citizens (Zafarullah and Khan, 2001). That decreased trust of the people in the concerned authority and they want to keep themselves away. The decision makers want to keep themselves away and want to maintain social status (Zafarullah, 2013). Institutions like social norms, practices influence administrative cultures that generally mirror social values, norms and practices.

Administrative tradition is also embedded in ancient rural society (Jamil, 2007) where the leaders with his centralized power structure used to solve problems and made decisions and characterized by social rank and hierarchy. They believe in stability where the deviation from rules denotes

immorality and disintegration among the society. Consequently, professional life merged to the personal life. Inherited the tradition, personalized relationship between the employer and employee is encouraged by the traditional system of Bangladesh. At the same time respect, loyalty, hierarchy and obedience to superior is expected from the preferred employee with having almost no chance of innovation and creativity (Jamil, 2002).

The effects of nationalism, militarism, fundamentalism and democracy manifest themselves as a powerful pressure and has widened the gap between concern and decision. He demonstrated that the difference of the regimes widened the power distance between the decision makers and the citizens and contributed in perpetuating the centralized decision making structure (Jahangir, 2002).

Social Culture of Bangladesh

The administrative characteristics of Bangladesh like the domination of centralized decision making and existence of strong hierarchy can be explained from the four dimensions of social institutions developed by Hofstede (1991). His four dimensions of social culture is applicable in basic societal issues (Hofstede and Bond, 1984)

Power Distance: Hofstede defines power distance as “as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally” (Hofstede, 1991, p. 28)”. In the high power distance or hierarchic organization decisions are taken in the top and are executed by following the hierarchy (Jamil, 2002).

Bangladesh is a high power distance society where relationship between employer and employee; teacher and student; male and female is characterized by high power distance. In the high power distant societies the less powerful accepts the power distance as normal. Bangladesh scores 801 in the power distance index where 100 means hierarchical (high power distance) and 1 means Egalitarian (low power distance). Power distance index also reveals that inequality exists for the acceptance of the situation by the followers as well (Haque and Mohammad, 2013). In a large power distance hierarchic organization, subordinates depend on the superiors and they only follow the decisions (Jamil, 2010) and inequality is accepted as social norms. Studies by Jamil (2007) shows, the characteristics of preferred employee are good family background, moral characteristics and obedience to employer. Thus social norms and cultural characteristics are reflected in

Asian Organization (Jamil, 2007). Similarly, high power distances, existence of complex rules prohibit participation and contributes to sustain the centralized structure.

Uncertainty Avoidance: This phenomenon concerns the extent of peoples comfort level in an unstructured situation and proclivity for risk taking and approach towards change and novelty (Haque and Mohammad, 2013). Strong uncertainty avoidance means more chance of following formal rules and regulations leads more centralization and formalization (Jamil, 2010). High uncertain society is resistant to administrative change where the formal laws and informal rules cause high power distance.

Bangladesh ranked high in uncertainty avoid index (Haque and Mohammad, 2013). High uncertainty avoidance creates rules, regulation (Haque and Mohammad, 2013) that contributes to centralized structure and thus limit participation.

Collectivism and Individualism: In the individual societies, culture promotes personal initiatives and achievements where social networks and frameworks are loose. On the other hand, collective societies assume that people are assimilated into groups from birth till death and characterized by protection and loyalty. Strong kinship like alliance to family is a basic characteristic. Personal relationships are so vital that they dominate over duties (Haque and Mohammad, 2013).

In the scale of 'Collectivism-Individualism', Bangladesh scored high in collectivism and very low in individualism. Principle of hierarchy in relationship is accepted as morality. Hierarchy in the society also based on the person's position. Hierarchical relationship promotes conservatism (Jamil, 2007). Informal relations than formal networks becomes important for gaining access for service delivery.

Masculine and Feminine Norms: Masculine norms promote assertiveness, competition, task orientation, ambition. Also, it denotes material success and separates gender role based on the tradition. Children grow with the ambition of career development, starving for material prosperity and wealth, (Haque and Mohammad, 2013). While, feminine Norms indicates soft values like caring, nursing, maintain warm relationship, concerns quality of life. Children grow toward modesty and solidarity.

High power distance and high uncertainty avoidance shape conception about organization whereas individualism and masculinity refers the perception about people in the organization (Hofstede, 2010)

In the Masculinity Feminine index of Hofstede, Bangladesh ranked moderately high in masculinity (Haque and Mohammad, 2013) that

indicates group basis division of tasks and thus promotes centralized authority.

Table 1 shows the four dimensions of social institutions of Bangladesh and their basic characteristics

Table 1: Social Institutions of Bangladesh

High Power Distance	High Uncertainty Avoidance	Masculine Norms	Collectivism
Loyalty, Obedience, Acceptance of Inequality as social norms, difference in social status	Resistant to administrative Change, less innovation, domination of formal rules, leader is considered as expert	Division of roles and responsibilities, crave for material prosperity	Allegiance to family, bond, concept of 'we' dominates rather than 'I', extended social network

From four these conceptions two continuums can be developed. First, a high power distance society that discourages new initiatives and risk taking. Second, a society with low power distance that promotes new initiatives. Though, there is no empirical evidence of the fact that high power distance society discourage risk taking and low power society promotes new initiatives. However, this is assumed that the society that follows high power distance denotes less participation as centralized power is not dispersed. Centralized structure discourages participation and thus new initiatives. Similarly, low power distance society refers to less hierarchy and thus more scope for participation. Consequently, encourage new ideas and initiatives.

Following figure reveals the social dynamics of high power distance in Bangladesh contributes to hierarchy and centralized structure through encouraging loyalty and obedience. High uncertainty avoidance concerns resistance to change and innovation and dependence on rules that also ultimately contributes to hierarchical structure. Comparative dominance of masculine rules believes in the division of roles and thus promotes hierarchy. Similarly, collectivism concerns extended social network and thus division on the basis of social status. Network is maintained with the people of more or less social and economic similar status. Thus, both the marginalized and elite groups build network with people of similar status that strengthen the unequal structure and contributes to centralization of decision making and hierarchy.

In short, the reason and rationale behind any behind decision largely depend and influenced by existing norms and practices. Where people are

asked to explain the rationale behind decision making, cultural knowledge play the vital role behind such reasoning (Briley, 2000). Rationality depends on culture (Finnemore, 1994) and culture creates difference in perception, value, behaviour and attitudes (Weber and Hsee, 2000) that shape the rationale behind decision making.

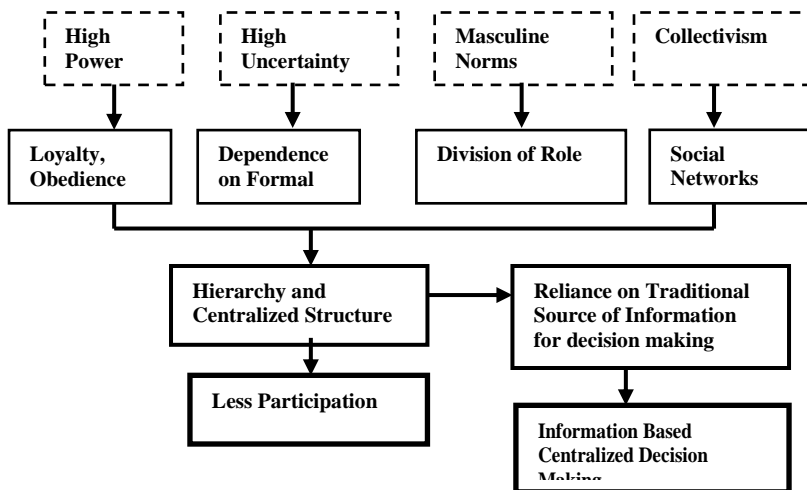


Figure 1: Impacts of institutions in participation and decision making approach

Decision Making Approach in Bangladesh

The decision making approach in Bangladesh is centralized and hierarchical. The fact is accepted that information is vital for decision making and searching of information may vary from organization or one society to another. Sources of information can be traditional like superiors, colleagues or juniors within the organization. The search above the organizational context involves politicians, researchers, academics, citizens and other relevant organizations. Where the decision making is hierarchic the search for information is limited within the boundary of the organization (Jamil, 2002). A study by Jamil (2002) shows that the bureaucracy influenced by British tradition in Bangladesh mainly depends on the traditional source of information like government circular and gazettes, colleagues, juniors and superiors for decision making. Also, sometimes they use 'travel and visit' as a non-traditional source of information. Thus, the previous study shows the decision making approach in Bangladesh has been dependent on information. The existing literature reflects that the decision making

approach in Bangladesh has been following the trend of information based decision making with a clear leaning toward centralized approach that is inherited from the British rule where the scope of participation of the stakeholders are very limited.

In Bangladesh the existing social institution like high power distance contributes to weak power relations, limited access and less participation. Also, high power distance creates conception about morality that encourages to maintain gaps and to obey rather than motivating participation that limits the participatory skill. Hierarchy and social network based on status create separate groups and social networks. Consequence is low level of citizen organizations and participations. Lack of political will is another hindrance. Even, the existing few scopes of indirect participation are not promoted properly the political will. Thus, the cultural aspects are reflected in the administrative features of Bangladesh government like centralization, nepotism, lack of access to the decision makers.

Following figure shows influence of culture in decision making approach in Bangladesh.

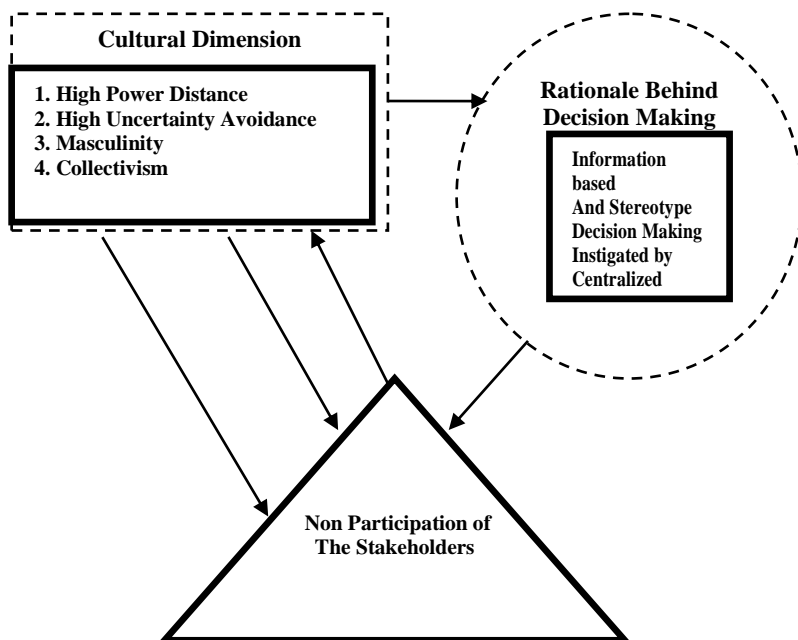


Figure 2: Influence of culture in decision making approach in Bangladesh

The figure shows that high power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity and collectivism and formal centralized structure contribute to information based and expert oriented decision making process. Consequently, the participation of the stakeholders is still very limited. At the same time, limited participation helps to retain the centralized and hierarchic structure. In the context of Bangladesh, high power distance among different groups like employer and employee; decision makers and citizens continues to the centralized structure where the dominating groups take the decisions with very limited scope of participation of the other potential stakeholders. High uncertainty avoidance limits the scope of innovativeness and thus contributes in retaining the traditional centralized structure. Masculinity in the context of Bangladesh thwart the participation of the vulnerable groups like women in the decision making approach. And collectivism promotes group interest and encourages nepotism. As a result, the decision making approach in the governance framework of Bangladesh is traditional and information based where the other potential stakeholders hardly get the scope of participation. This limited scope of participation of the citizens and other stakeholders contribute in sustaining the social culture of Bangladesh.

Concluding Remarks

Administrative culture and decision making approach of Bangladesh is highly influenced by the social institutions of Bangladesh like high power distance, collectivism, masculinity and high uncertainty avoidance. All these phenomena, on one hand, results in maintaining hierarchy and centralization of power by creating different social status, group identities and strict regulations. On the other side, these social institutions limit participations of the mass people in the decision making framework. The high power distance and division among the groups persuade to maintain gaps between the mass people and the decision makers and not to express their opinion.

Dependence on information instigated by dependence of formal rules and centralized structure is another characteristics of the decision making process indicates an inclination toward technical rational. Reliance on traditional source of information for decision making also limit the scope of participation of the stakeholders.

The study demonstrates that the informal social intuitions influence the administrative culture by forming rules, hierarchy and centralized structure. High reliance on hierarchy and rules create dependence on information from the traditional sources. Both formal and informal rules and also reliance on information limits the scope of participation of

the stakeholders. The limited participation of the stakeholders also contributes to strengthen the social hierarchy and centralized decision making structure.

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