

Zeitschrift: Ethnologica Helvetica
Herausgeber: Schweizerische Ethnologische Gesellschaft
Band: 6 (1982)

Artikel: Urban elite in Dacca : an exploratory formulation
Autor: Barua, Tushar Kanti
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-1007709>

Nutzungsbedingungen

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

Conditions d'utilisation

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

Terms of use

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

Download PDF: 20.05.2025

ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>

URBAN ELITE IN DACCA: AN EXPLORATORY FORMULATION

Tushar Kanti Barua

Before I proceed on to the description of urban elite in Dacca, a few observations are in order. This paper is not based on direct field study of the urban elite in Dacca. This is an attempt to put together some ideas about the problem formed during my residence in Dacca as a student of the Dacca University and subsequent fieldwork for the study of the processes of elite formation in Bangladesh and the problems of socio-economic change in 1972-73, and again in 1978-79, which required my stay in Dacca. So in this sense my exposition is impressionistic rather than the result of investigation within the theoretical and methodological framework of urban anthropology. It raises more questions than answer them, revealing the exploratory nature of the article.

Now as to the topic of urban elite in Dacca. I will first of all discuss what I mean by elite. As Bottomore (1966) rightly pointed out, elite theories were originally developed specifically against Marx's theory of social classes by Mosca, Pareto, Weber and Michels. The concept is ideologically value-loaded, in that it asserts that the members of the elite are what they are because of their superior qualities. In virtue of these qualities they are considered real actors on the historical stage, capable of transforming the society through social reforms and economic development. There is little empirical validity in this conception. I mean by elite those individuals and groups who by virtue of their status, wealth and power exercise considerable influence in the shaping of political, economic and cultural life of a community or a country. Whether they also form part of social classes is a matter of investigation and depends on a precise definition of a "class" based on empirical facts.

Status, wealth and power are not mutually exclusive, they are often interrelated. Status can be formal or informal, ascriptive or can be achieved through means considered appropriate by a society, and it depends which values are considered important in a particular society on the basis of which it confers elite status. Wealth may be an important source of status, and may provide means to achieve, maintain and improve it. However, the way wealth is valued varies from society to society – the kind of wealth, use made of it and kind of benefits derived from it. Power can be derived from status and wealth and can also arise from the control of, or/and potentially effective participation in the decision making processes, from the role in the production processes, as well as control of, or proximity to state apparatus. These different elements are interlinked reinforcing each other and sometimes inseparable, and it is a matter of investigation to establish their inter-relationship.

There is a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding surrounding the term "urban". As Southall (1973:5) pointed out, "some assume that 'urban' refers to population aggregates of certain size, at a certain level of density, others that it means major dependence on occupations other than agriculture or direct subsistence production; while others relate it to some general kind of social complexity". Without going into this controversy which concerns general phenomena, in our case one could choose several criteria for characterizing urban elite. Such are for instance:

- a) residence and occupation in the city
- b) income and education
- c) relationship to the urban power structure
- d) standard of living and life-style
- e) values and ideologies etc.

These variables are interrelated and may be associated to a different degree with various urban elites. On the other hand one cannot regard all such criteria as exclusively associated with the urban elite in Dacca

- they are in a kind of continuum and are overlapping with the traditional rural social structure and value system. This seems to be so because of the low level of industrialization, technological development and occupational specialization in Bangladesh.

Dacca is the capital city of Bangladesh, all the important politico-administrative bodies of the state and the nation are concentrated in Dacca, and as such it constitutes the principal centre of power structure of the country. It is the main centre of trade and business, and inspite of the low level of industrialization whatever important industries there are, are to be found in the suburbs of Dacca. The principal institutions of higher education and culture like universities, Museums, Art galleries etc., Chambers of commerce and trade, centres of amusement like cinema, parks and gardens etc., are mainly located in Dacca. As the national capital all the major transportation and communications links with the outside world - through international Airport, foreign diplomatic establishments, trade, aid and cultural and material exchanges - are maintained through this city.

The growth and development of Dacca from a small administrative town from the pre-British period to the present day bourgeoning city of hundreds of thousands and consequent changes in its structure and organization and socio-economic composition, is to be analyzed in the context of historical, political and economic changes which is not the concern of this paper.

For heuristic purpose one could identify different groups of urban elite on the basis of criteria mentioned before:

a) Bureaucratic-military elite, b) Political elite, c) Business elite, d) Professional intellectual elite, e) professional elite in medicine, law, journalism, banking etc., f) labour leaders, and g) student elite.

The list is not exhaustive, neither the classification represents a hierarchical ranking. Neither group is socio-economically homogeneous, their socio-economic origin is overlapping, there is both interrela-

tionship of collaboration and conflict between and among them. But in general it can be said that they come from middle and upper middle class (they are very much upper class in Bangladesh situation or going to be one) background, and by virtue of their income, education, and position in the state apparatus and other institutions of public and private enterprises, major political parties, they play a dominant role in the urban as well as national life.

In an underdeveloped country like Bangladesh with a weak "bourgeoisie" the possession of the instruments of the state becomes one of the significant factors for playing a dominant role in the socio-economic and political life of the capital city and the nation. The state plays a central and decisive role in the underdeveloped country. The omnipotent role of the state and of those in control of it has been a tradition during the long period of colonial rule. Its scope has vastly increased afterwards because of new economic activities undertaken by the state for national development. Control of the state not only means political domination but also a source of economic power and privileges deriving out of such power (see Barua 1978 for more details).

One of the most important phenomena which deserves particular attention in Bangladesh is the rapid growth of an "urban" elite particularly in Dacca of civil servants, administrators (civil and military), intellectuals, professionals in various fields. The formation of the elites is closely connected with the complex structure of administration inherited from the colonial period and a disproportionate increase in the state apparatus and army after the independence of Bangladesh, where a formerly provincial administration located in Dacca was turned into a central and national one with all it implies in terms of privileges, scale of salaries and benefits for the top personnel and their decision making power. As a result of nationalization and state control of industries, establishment of para-statal organizations the number of leading personnel like managers, administrators, accountants, engineers, technicians and other scientific and academic staff has greatly increased.

The increased role of these elites follows from the fact that as a result of mixed and transitory nature of production relations and rather unformed character of class relations there are hardly any politically organized class forces available to combat this role (Barua 1981).

We will deal with the bureaucratic-military section of the urban elite since its members, to a great extent, set the model and give tone to urban and national life. Space would not permit me to deal with all the sections of the urban elite, although I would try to show their relationship to the bureaucratic-military elite wherever it is relevant.

All the major policy making bodies like the Planning Commission, National Economic Council, Public Corporations, executive organ of the government like the Central Secretariat and Administrative Staff College etc., are all located in Dacca and 80% of the top positions in all these bodies are occupied by the bureaucratic and military elite. In terms of emolument and salary and other benefits they constitute one of the most privileged groups. Their urban elite status is also reflected in the residential patterns.

They live in expensive government-subsidized houses or in exclusive residential quarters of the city, whose hierarchical ranking is most apparent in the name of the section, blocks and roads and even type of apartments. The duration of their residence in Dacca varies from person to person depending on the length of their service, the place of original residence but they tend to establish themselves permanently even after their retirement from active service.

Their standard of living and life-style are very much part of the urban milieu. Their consumption-oriented urban values are manifested through the possession (government-owned) of expensive chauffeur-driven cars, television sets, refrigerators and other gadgets of durable consumables like radio-sets, telephones, tape-recorders etc., and other patterns of consumption which are displayed most visibly.

They are linked among themselves not only by their identical position in the administrative hierarchy, by their similar training and education, but also, not infrequently, by other ties of friendship, marriage, kinship, locality (of origin) etc., and other cultural ones through expensive social clubs, by their being customers in fashionable restaurants and shops in the most luxurious parts of the city. The sense of identity and fellow-feeling among them is mediated through mass media communication-news papers, telephone, television and through exclusive social gatherings both formal and informal. They are the most eager absorbers of modern western values and tastes in the acquisition of foreign symbols of prestige (eg. colour television etc.).

Prosperous businessmen, bankers, well to do professionals and influential political party and labour leaders share the same residential quarters, possess the same symbols of prestige and follow similar life-style as those of the above, but they do not have the same kind of cohesion among themselves typical of the bureaucratic-military elite.

The ideology of the bureaucratic-military elite is not very well-defined. However, their approach and method of work are much characterized by bureaucratic decision-making and technocratic implementation. These may be said to be the particular features of the "ideology" of the urban bureaucratic-military elite. In this "ideology" the problems of urban or for that matter of national socio-economic development are seen as the problem of administering things rather than the involvement of people. Decision making is typically a process of movement of files and orders through a hierarchy of officials. The bureaucratic method of decision making is complemented by technocratic means of implementing decisions so made. The problems of implementation are seen as technical problems in terms of correct "expert" advice, "efficient organization" and "planning of things", and their source of inspiration and guidance is obviously the foreign western milieu in virtue of the dependence on aid, grants, technical assistance from outside and through their education and training in the western centres of learning or in those modelled

on western lines. The result, of course, is the disastrous failures in the implementation of projects either for economic development, population control, spread of literacy or town planning or elimination of unhealthy crowding of poor masses in slums and huts.

Some assume that the separation of the urban elite in general and their rural counterpart is not merely geographical, economic or political but it also informs the whole structure of social values, norms and patterns of consumption. This would be, of course, to overlook many of the rural values and traditional pattern of social relationship persisting among the urban elite despite their apparent modernity. There is a considerable lack of coherence in the life-style and values of the urban elite. One who has a direct experience of the routine living of the urban elite can detect this feature in the separation of "living room", "drawing room", "dining room" etc., from bathroom and kitchen, the former as the show-window of modernity, decorated with expensive furniture of comfort, television sets, draperies and art objects (may be copies of foreign art objects of cheap imitation), neat and clean, and the latter having the appearance of neglected and unhygienic places to be avoided by all means. This can be said to be a carry over of the rural tradition in the village where most often the kitchen is the domain of the female and maid-servants, and the toilet places considered impure and dirty better to be left to themselves. Although the elite may live in expensive urban residences and apartments there is little regard for the care and maintenance of the immediate vicinity where it is not rare to find unclean dustbins and heaps of rubbish and stagnant water infested with germs of malaria. A lack of sense of 'civic' culture characterize the majority of the urban elite.

Many of the urban elites, be they bureaucratic-military, political and professional (more so) have close links with the rural countryside in that many of them are absentee landowners, or the sons or close relatives of those who have land. Land may not be the chief means of livelihood, but it is retained as an asset to produce extra income

without efforts and, as a kind of secure and profitable investment (because of land scarcity, overpopulation, high rate of inflation, low tax etc.,) for any eventuality and as an insurance for bad days. So we see that although the elites are urban by residence and occupation they form part of the rural social structure and power relationship that exist in the villages. Depending on the closeness of the rural areas to the Dacca city and facilities of communication between Dacca and other areas it is not unusual to find a host of persons visiting the influential urban elite with gifts of fruit, vegetables, fish, meat and other items of consumption as an expression of ties of kinship, locality, as recognition of past favours done or future ones expected, and as symbols of patron-client relationship existing between the rural elite and the urban counterpart.

This interconnection is also maintained by the urban elite through the employment of house-servants, both male and female who come from rural areas and often their poor relations who perform heterogeneous, useful and dependable service faithfully and guarantee security to their masters for a mere pittance. On the other hand, because of overpopulation and lack of opportunities outside agriculture which is saturated with landless labourers, this can be the only means for the destitute and poor to escape starvation.

The educated urban elite tends to profess modern values of dignity for work and equality, however, they show a strong distaste (traditional) for anything connected with manual work which they consider degrading and in actual practice regards the house-servants as nothing more than chattels. Their attitude is no better in their relationship with their low ranking subordinates which is paternalistic. They pay lip service to the equality of the sexes and to the secular spirit (supposedly a modern urban phenomenon). They can be very gallant in their behaviour towards Euro-American women in giving them precedence and showing respect (some consider them easy game) but they can be extremely inhibitive, patronizing, aggressive towards their womenfolk. To one who had the

occasion to attend social gathering, the separation and isolation of the wives from their husbands and their colleagues draw immediate attention. This can be said to be a modified version of the observation of Purda (veil) on the part of the women. This happens inspite of the fact that many of the wives may be highly educated, engaged in learned professions, with experience of living in foreign western culture and environment. The intermixture between the sexes in a common social gathering is considered as a form of sexual license often detrimental to the career and reputation of the husband or wife. On the other hand, in exceptional cases and limited circles wife swapping is not unheard of as an example of extreme modernity.

In keeping with their secular spirit many of the urban elite donot follow the traditional practice of regular (Islamic) prayers and donot perform all the religious duties as prescribed by Quran. But it is interesting to note that in Dacca there a few famous Pirs or saintly persons who are revered by the highly placed urban elite for their gift of divination and extra-ordinary capacities for intervention in case of difficulties. They act as a chain of communication between their different followers and "help" in the placement, promotion and advancement of them. The traditional belief in the efficacy of prayers and religious life seems to have been shifted to that in saintly interceptor in an urban environment. This permits and facilitates the emergence and maintenance of new forms of profoundly personal relationship in an urban environment known for its anonymity.

It is not my intention to pass value judgment on such practices, it is obvious that people should follow the norms and practices consistent with a particular socio-cultural milieu. But it is worth pointing out that urban living does not necessarily lead to the elimination of values and traditional pattern of behaviour even in the case of highly educated and powerful and allegedly "modern" elite, who profess to be the carrier and transmitter of "modern" western values. Along with Abner Cohen (1974) one could possibly say that there is a dialectical relationship between sym-

bolism and power relationship in which old symbols (values and ritual) perform new functions and new symbols take on old functions in the articulation of power relationship in a complex society in transition.

The relation of domination and dependence, hierarchy of status and power based on wealth, age, sex, occupation, distinction between mental and manual labour, and value system characteristic of traditional rural society seem to be grafted on to the urban social structure and living with certain modifications.

Many of the above characteristics are common to most other urban elite groups, although their elite status derives from sources other than, and which are overlapping with, those of the bureaucratic-military elite, into the details of which we cannot go into this short paper (see Barua 1978 for other elite groups).

It would be extremely hazardous to generalize about the character of the urban elite in Dacca as a whole on the basis of above observations. They can be at best regarded as tentative. There may be many exceptions who do not follow the general runs of elite tendencies and interests, particularly among the professional intellectuals represented by some academicians, journalists and literary critics who continuously voice their criticism of the misplaced values of the dominant urban elite, their failings and indifference to the socio-economic reality of Bangladesh and dependence on imported models of cultural development. However, any definitive statement about the character and role of the urban elite in Dacca has to be based on hard data which I do not have at my disposal. The purpose of this paper will be considered served if it stimulates raising further questions and enquiry.

Summary

In this paper the author presents an impressionistic account of the character and role of the urban elite in Dacca. Basing himself upon personal knowledge he shows how inspite of the urban occupation, residence and life-style of the elite the latter's values and interests are linked with the traditional rural social structure which influences the practices and behaviour patterns of the urban elite.

Bibliography

Barua, Tushar K.

1978 Political Elite in Bangladesh. Bern, Peter Lang.

1981 Conflict and Factionalism in the Elite Politics of Bangladesh
- Paper presented to the VIIth European Congress for Modern South Asian Studies, held in London, July 6-11, 1981.

Bottomore, T.B.

1966 Elites and Society. Penguin Books.

Cohen, Abner

1974 Two-Dimensional Man: An Essay on the Anthropology of Power and Symbolism in Complex Society. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Southall, Aidan (ed).

1973 Urban Anthropology. New York, Oxford University Press.

