DECENTERING THE STATE FOR LOCAL ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH REPRESENTATION: SOCIAL DIVIDES AS A BARRIER IN SOUTH ASIA

M. SHAMSUL HAQUE
National University of Singapore, Singapore

ABSTRACT

In recent decades, in line with the ethos of democratization and market-driven reforms, there has emerged a growing trend towards decentering the state and transferring its power to various non-state actors, including local government institutions. In the developing world, although the principles and processes of decentralization have been introduced in order to enhance local-level accountability, the realization of such accountability has been greatly constrained or compromised due to various forms of social divides based on class, caste, and gender. This article explores these issues and concerns with special reference to selected South Asian countries.

INTRODUCTION

In line with the contemporary forces of democratization, expansion of promarket ethos, and attacks on interventionist governments, there has emerged a worldwide trend in favor of decentering the state's role and transferring its activities to non-state actors. One major facet of this trend is the decentralization of authority and responsibility to various local governments. It is observed that in the developing world, "practically every country has experimented with some form of decentralization or local government reform with varying aims and outcomes . . ." (Parker, 1995:18). In order to create a democratic polity, the decentralized system of local government is now considered essential, because it is likely to involve citizens

in the policy process, produce decisions based on local needs, educate people in democracy, develop political leadership, facilitate service delivery, and so on (Haque, 1997). One major challenge to such decentralization, however, remains to be the realization of an accountable local governance system, especially in developing countries where there are serious institutional as well as contextual obstacles to maintain public accountability at both the central and local levels.

Interestingly, although the decentralization initiatives are meant to enhance local level accountability, such initiatives also create a greater need for such accountability as authority and responsibility are devolved and resources and services are transferred to various levels of local governance. More specifically, this accountability becomes central concern when decentralization leads to greater local level autonomy to earn revenues from local taxes, commercial ventures, and grants and donations; to spend money for roads, schools, and infrastructure; to deliver and distribute basic goods and services like education, housing, and transport; and to elect and appoint local government representatives or officials (Haque, 1997).

Similar to the measures of central government accountability, there are certain means available for ensuring local government accountability, including regular election to elect local councils and chairmen or mayors, use of committees and sub-committees, role of local media, codes of conduct and rules of business, and certain controls exercised by central government. However, one most democratic means of such accountability is the provision of local election that may guarantee the representation of various groups or sections of society irrespective of their class, caste, gender, and religious backgrounds. The degree of such direct electoral representation of these diverse groups in local government institutions often determine the

extent to which they are accountable to these groups and responsive to their needs and demands. Without fair representation of major groups and classes in the organizational composition of local institutions, it remains uncertain whether other means of accountability can ensure their accountability and responsiveness to landless farmers, lower-caste citizens, ethnic minorities, and less privileged women (Haque, 1997). Thus, one major concern is regarding the impacts of various forms of "social divides" (based on income, caste, race, religion, and gender) on the efficacy of local government accountability. It is because, the powerless and underprivileged groups are often incapable to make the local government system answerable to them and to get access to basic services provided by the system (Nayak, 1995). In exploring the issue, this article examines South Asian countries that are widely known for long experiences in both the decentralization initiatives and the severe pattern of social divides.

As a region, South Asia covers countries with strong interactive history and common socio-cultural traditions—including Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka—although they differ considerably in terms of territorial size, ethno-religious composition, political system, and income structure (Zafarullah and Huque, 1998). In various degrees, these countries have moved towards decentralizing their national governments and transferring central authorities and responsibilities to local governments. In the current literature, there are critical studies explaining the limitations of these local government systems and their accountability and responsiveness in South Asia, including the prevalence of undemocratic regimes, dominance of central government, unwillingness of bureaucrats to share power, influence of rural elite, lack of people's participation, and so on (Westergaard, 2000; Rana, 2000).

However, there is a relative dearth of critical literature with regard to how local level accountability may have been adversely affected by major social divisions based on income, caste, gender, and religion found in most South Asian countries (Rana, 2000). In exploring this particular concern in the region, this article describes the current systems of local governance, examines the major forms social divides, and explains how such social divides constitute a major barrier to the realization of local government accountability.

TOWARD A DECENTRALIZED STATE THROUGH LOCAL GOVERNANCE IN SOUTH ASIA

In general, there are certain widely known forms or types of decentralization, including: delegation (transfer of certain power and functions to sub-national or other government entities without giving up ultimate decision); deconcentration (transfer of power and functions to local administrative units of central government); devolution (transfer of power and functions to elected local political entities); intermediation (transfer of some power and functions to local self-help organizations); and privatization (transfer of power and functions to the business sector) (Rondinelli, 1983; Parker, 1995). Among these major forms, devolution is considered most effective in decentering the state in terms of a genuine transfer of power and responsibilities from central government to local-level institutions. It can be observed from the discussion below that at least officially, South Asian countries have increasingly moved towards devolution by restructuring their local governance systems (UNESCAP, 1999).

In *Bangladesh,* since the end of the British colonial rule, the local government system has experienced many reforms, especially with a view to enhance the

decentralization of power and expansion of people's participation. There are four major territorial units of local government in rural areas – from the highest and largest to the lowest and smallest units – at the four levels such as Zila (District), Upazila (Subdistrict), Union, and Gram (Village) (Moscare, 2002). Each District is divided into several Subdistricts, each Subdistrict into some Unions, and each Union into few Villages. Correspondingly, there are four tiers of local government, including Gram Sarkars (Village Councils), Union Parishads (Union Councils), Upazila Parishads (Subdistrict Councils), and Zila Parishads (District Councils) (Islam, 1999; UNDP, 2003). It should be pointed out that except Union Council, other tiers of local governments were abandoned, reinstated, renamed, and restructured from time to time by different regimes (Boex, Gudgeon, and Shotton, 2002). For example, Upazila Parishads were created in 1982, abandoned in 1991, and then replaced with another form known as Upazila Development Coordination Committees or UDCCs (UNDP, 2003). In the urban areas, local government units include Pourashavas (Municipalities), and some of the largest Municipalities are given the status of City Corporations. In terms of composition, most of these units have elected chairs and council members.

In terms of composition, the Village Council operates at the Ward level and does not have directly elected members. Its members (community representatives) are selected by the Subdistrict-level government executive, and it is chaired by the Union Council member from the Village (Slater and Preston, 2004). The Union Council has a more representative structure composed of one chairman and nine members (all directly elected irrespective of gender) as well as three additional directly elected female members (Boex, Gudgeon, and Shotton, 2002). At the Subdistrict level, after replacing the Subdistrict Council – which had one directly elected chairman of its own and the

Union Council Chairmen as its members – the current UDCC was introduced as an administrative unit that comprised all chairmen of Union Councils (within the Subdistrict) as its members, one of these Union Council chairmen as its chairperson (appointed on a rotational basis), the government executive officer of the Subdistrict as its secretary, other Subdistrict-level officials from line ministries or departments as non-voting members, and the member of national legislature from the Subdistrict as special adviser (Slater and Preston, 2004: 11-13).

At the District level, although the District Council is supposed have one chairman, fifteen members, and five female members for reserved seats (all elected), this Council has not yet been formed for various reasons (CLGF, 2006a). At this point, for each District, there is a District Development Co-ordination Committee led by the Deputy Commissioner (the District-level government executive) and composed of all District-level government officials (Slater and Preston, 2004). With regard to urban local government, the Municipalities and City Corporations have elected mayors or chairmen as well as elected councilors or commissioners (UNESCAP, 1999; CLGF, 2006a). From the above discussion on local governance, it can be concluded that although there are initiatives to pursue decentralization, due to the continuing bureaucratic dominance by the central government, the overall nature of such decentralized local governance can be characterized as deconcentration rather than devolution.

In the case of *India,* there are also different categories of rural and urban local governments. For the rural areas, after considerable shifts in the nature and composition of local governance, the Panchayat Raj Act of 1993 introduced a three-tier structure known as the Panchayati Raj system (CLGF, 2006b; Poornima and Vyasulu, 1999). Under this system, there are now three levels of local government, including Gram (Village) at the

lowest level, Block at the middle, and Zilla (District) at the highest level. The corresponding units of local government are Gram Panchayats (Village Councils), Block Panchayats (Block Councils), and Zilla Panchayats (District Councils). It should be mentioned, however, that there are some minor variations among Indian states with regard to how many tiers are in practice and how they are designated. For the urban sector, there are three categories of local government institutions, including the Nagar Panchayats (Suburban Councils) for the areas in transition toward urban status, the Municipal Councils for small urban areas, and the Municipal Corporations for large urban areas (Montes, 2002; CLGF, 2006b). There are about 600 District Councils, 6000 Block Councils, 250000 Village Councils, 1900 Suburban Councils, 1700 Municipal Councils, and 96 Municipal Corporations in India (Mathew, 2003).

In terms of structural composition, for each Village Council, there are several wards which usually elect its Panches (members). It also has a directly elected Sarpanch or Pradhan (chief) and a Upa-Sarpanch or Upa-Pradhan (vice-chief) (Behar and Kumar, 2002; Chattopadhyay and Duflo, 2003). For the Block Council, there are often elected and non-elected members—including members elected from its constituencies, members co-opted from the marketing cooperatives or societies, and member(s) of the State Legislative Assembly—who in turn elect its chairperson (Behar and Kumar, 2002:5, 12). For the District Council, there are members elected from its constituencies and members of the State Legislative Assembly, and these members elect its president and vice-president (Behar and Kumar, 2002:13-14). In the urban context, the Municipal Councils and Corporations usually have directly elected and nominated councilors as well as directly or indirectly elected mayors (UNESCAP, 1999; CLGF, 2006b). It appears from the above scenario that the

local government system in India has gradually moved towards greater devolution.

In *Nepal,* some of the most recent measures in favor of decentering the state include various National Development Plans as well as the Local Self-Governance Act of 1999, which emphasize further devolution of authority to local government institutions (Silwal, 2003). Currently, there are two categories of local government bodies at the two levels of territorial units – the Village Development Committees (VDCs) at the lower and smaller level of Villages, and the District Development Committees (DDCs) at the higher and larger level of Districts (Winter, 2004). For the urban sector, there are Municipalities, Metropolis, and Sub-Metropolis (Shrestha, 2001).

However, the structural composition appears to be more complicated. For each Village, there are several Wards (each Ward with a Ward Committee composed of directly elected chair, one female member and three other members). The executive function of the Village is assigned to the VDC comprised of directly elected chairperson and vice-chairperson, and several members, including all Ward chairs within the Village and two other members (at least one female) from the Village. The legislative functions of Village is carried out by the Village Council, which is made up of the VDC chairperson and vice-chairperson, all Ward Committee members, and six nominated members (at least one woman plus representatives from disadvantaged groups) (Winter, 2004:1-2).

At the District level, the executive tasks are assigned to the DDC, which comprises the chair and vice-chair elected by and from all Village Councils and Municipal Councils within the District, several area members elected by and from these Village Councils and Municipal Councils, the members of national legislature from the District, and another two members (at least one

female) nominated from the District Council. The legislative functions belong to the District Council, which includes quite a number of members residing within the District – including the chairpersons and vice-chairpersons of all VDCs, mayors and vice-mayors of all municipalities, all members of the DDC, members of national legislature (ex-officio members), and another six members (at least one woman plus representatives from disadvantaged groups) nominated from the general public (Winter, 2004:1-2).

In the urban areas, for each Municipal Council, all councilors are elected through the Ward-level election, while its mayor and deputy mayor are elected through direct votes (Shrestha, 2001). It should be mentioned here that these relatively democratic structures of rural and urban local government in the form of devolution could often be ineffective in Nepal. For instance, it is pointed out that after mid-2002, the elected local government system was suspended, Village Councils and District Councils were dissolved, and the VDCs and DDCs were being run by civil servants (Winter, 2004:10).

In *Pakistan,* the local government system experienced some significant changes after the adoption of the Devolution of Power Plan in 2000, which aimed to devolve political power and decentralize administrative authority. Under the new system, there are three levels of local government (Union, Tehsil, and District). At the lowest and smallest Union level, there are Union Councils, each of which comprises the elected Nazim (mayor) and Naib Nazim (deputy mayor), one member elected from minority groups, twelve Muslim members elected for twelve general seats (four female), and another six elected members from peasants and workers (two female) (Reyes and Azizah, 2002).

At the middle Tehsil (Subdistrict) level, there are Tehsil/Town Councils. Each Tehsil/Town Council

comprises over thirty members, including all deputy mayors of Union Councils within the Tehsil/Town, and the members from three categories of reserved seats (33 percent of the number of those Union Councils reserved for women, 5 percent for minorities, and 5 percent for peasants and workers) who are elected by all Union Council members within the Tehsil/Town (Reyes and Azizah, 2002; CLGF, 2006c). These Union Council members also elect the mayor and deputy mayor of the Tehsil/Town Councils. At the District level, each District Council has a larger number of members, including the mayors of all Union Councils within the District as well as the members from three kinds of reserved seats (similar percentages like the Tehsil/Town councils) who are elected by all Union Council members within the District. The mayor and deputy mayor of each District Council are elected by the members of all Union Councils within the District (CLGF, 2006c:182). In terms of overall pattern of local governance in Pakistan, the above discussion shows that under the current plan, there is a gradual shift towards devolution.

Finally, in the case of *Sri Lanka,* there are three broad categories of local government units, including the Pradeshiya Sabhas (Divisional Councils) for rural areas, Municipal Councils for large towns and cities, and Urban Councils for small towns and semi-urban areas (CLGF, 2006d). These local government Councils are based on three legal foundations, including the Pradeshiya Sabhas Act, the Municipal Council Ordinance, and the Urban Council Ordinance (Dainis, 1999). In terms of composition, each of these Councils has members whose number varies depending on the population size in the Council. In addition to these council members, each Municipal Council has a mayor and a deputy mayor, whereas each Urban Council or Divisional Council has a chairperson and a vice-chairperson.

All the Councils are elected based on the proportional representation system rather than the ward system that previously existed in Sri Lanka and is still prevalent in some other South Asian cases. One unique electoral feature of these Divisional, Municipal, and Urban Councils in Sri Lanka is that they adopt the political party lines in electing the members of Councils. In this process, various political parties, independent groups, or coalitions submit the lists of nominated candidates, and people vote for them according to their choice of parties or groups (CLGF, 2006d:225). In each nomination list submitted by a party or group, there must be 40 percent quota for candidates of 18-35 age group in order to ensure youth representation. In any case, once the Councils are elected along the party lines, the elected councilors of the majority party or group select from among themselves the mayor and deputy mayor in the case of a Municipal Council, and the chairperson and vice-chairperson in the case of Urban Council and Divisional Council. This strong affiliation of the local government system with political parties is likely to weaken the system's neutrality as well as its status of decentralization due to the influence of national-level party leadership.

It is clear from the above discussion that most South Asian countries have taken some major initiatives to decentralize the state and devolve its authority to various local government institutions, although there are cross-national variations in the degree of such devolution in the region. One major objective of this decentralization or devolution, which puts emphasis on greater autonomy and power of elected local institutions and representatives, has been to enhance local-level accountability. In this regard, although considerable progress has been made in South Asia, there are critics who observe some limits and constraints to the realization of public participation and accountability. They suggests that in most developing

countries, including those in South Asia, local level accountability is constrained by the continuing control and power exercised by the state and the ruling party, the dominance of local bureaucracy and local elite over local institutions, the dependence of local government units on central government for financial and technical supports, and so on (Haque, 1997; UNESCAP, 1999). While these factors are widely cited as the main obstacles, there is a need for further studies to explore how various forms of social divides (e.g. income gap and gender inequality) may constitute a formidable challenge to people's participation and accountability at the local level. It is explained in the next section that even when there is greater devolution, more local autonomy, and less government control, there could still be a threat to local level accountability posed by such social divides that are quite extreme in South Asia.

SOCIAL DIVIDES AND THEIR CRITICAL IMPACTS ON LOCAL LEVEL ACCOUNTABILITY

In South Asian countries, there are some serious forms of social divisions or divides based on income, gender, caste, race, religion, education, age, and so on. Among these categories, the critical social divides that affect local level accountability include the income divide, the gender divide, and the caste-race divide. It is pointed out that despite the decentralization measures undertaken by governments, the local government systems in South Asia are still dominated by "rich, powerful an upper caste males" (UNESCAP, 1997). This section of the article examines the nature and extent of social divides and their impacts on local government accountability with specific focus on how such divides prevent the underprivileged classes, castes, and groups from making local institutions accountable to them through direct representation and participation in these institutions.

Income Divide and Local Accountability

South Asia has one of the highest proportion of poor people in the world. The percentage of people living below the poverty line (below $2 per day) is 82.8 percent in Bangladesh, 79.9 percent in India, 82.5 percent in Nepal, 65.6 percent in Pakistan, and 50.7 percent in Sri Lanka (UNDP, 2005:227-228). In terms of Human Poverty Index, among 173 countries, India ranks 55, Pakistan 68, Bangladesh 72, Nepal 76, and Sri Lanka 31 (UNDP, 2002:157-158). The actual situation of this poverty is even more alarming due to the severe level of income inequality in the region. The shares of national income for poorest 10 percent and richest 10 percent are respectively 3.9 and 28.6 percent in Bangladesh, 3.5 and 33.5 percent in India, 3.2 and 29.8 percent in Nepal, 4.1 and 27.6 percent in Pakistan, and 3.5 and 28.0 percent in Sri Lanka (UNDP, 2002: 195-196).

In an agricultural country like Bangladesh, the income divide is also evident in the country's extreme condition of landlessness. In the case of India, about 40 percent of the population is landless, 45 percent marginal farmers, and thus 85 percent landless or near-landless (Sainath, 1999). Similar situation of inequality in land ownership also exists in Nepal, Pakistan, and Sri Lanka. How does this income divide affect local government accountability in the region?

It is pointed out that due to the income divide, the rural elite dominate various local government units, divert developmental programs and projects in their favor, and thus local level accountability become basically an accountability to the local elite rather than to underprivileged population (Haque, 1997). In Bangladesh, for example, most elected or appointed local government leaders are usually from rich families, there is weak participation of poor or low-income households in local

government affairs (Moscare, 2002). In the case of India, the chiefs, chairpersons, and members of Village Councils and Block Councils come predominantly from wealthy local elite, and politics remains largely an elite politics (Dreze and Sen, 2002). It is also largely the rich elite who can effectively participate in local institutions. Some scholars observe that due to socioeconomic inequality, there is limited participation of ordinary people in local government and the potential of "local democracy" has been derailed in India (Montes, 2002:62; Dreze and Sen, 2002:17). As Gaiha and Kulkarni mention, "the Panchayats in rural poverty alleviation points to a diversity of outcomes, often unfavorable to the poor" (Gaiha and Kulkarni, 2002:71).

In the case of Nepal, the non-representation of the poor in local government institutions is well known, which is not only due to their lack of access to power, but also because of the fact that they have no time to participate or get involved in local bodies as they are too busy to earn and satisfy their basic needs (Timsina, 2002). In Sri Lanka, the poor are less likely to be elected and represented in local councils largely due to the excessive cost of election campaigns (UNESCAP, 1999). These brief analyses and scenarios demonstrate that the existing income divide not only constrains the possibility of poorer households to get elected for local government institutions, it also limits their active participation in such institutions. Without their direct representation and active participation, the poor are unable to make these institutions responsive to their needs and accountable to their demands.

Gender Divide and Local Accountability

In South Asia, there is a significant degree of gender inequality in different domains of society. Some studies show that as a percentage of average male income, the average female income is 34 percent in India, 26

percent in Pakistan, 30 percent in Bangladesh, 50 percent in Nepal, and 55 percent in Sri Lanka; female representation in managerial and administrative position is only 2 percent in India, 4 percent in Pakistan, 5 percent in Bangladesh, and 16 percent in Sri Lanka; and female representation in parliament is 7 percent in India, 3 percent in Pakistan, 9 percent in Bangladesh, and 5 percent in both Nepal and Sri Lanka (SURF, 2001; UNDP, 2002). It is also reported that gender empowerment score (1.00 is the highest) is only 0.228 for India, 0.179 for Pakistan, 0.305 for Bangladesh, and 0.286 for Sri Lanka, which is much lower than the overall score (0.564) for the whole developing world. Gender divide is also reflected in unequal access and entitlement as well as social assumptions and practices.

In Bangladesh, many women suffer from poverty, illiteracy, poor health, and powerlessness. In India, women are severely discriminated, and they suffer from child marriage, lack of education and health care, mental and physical torture, sexual abuse and rape, and other forms of domestic violence (Amnesty International, 2004; HRW, 2001). In the case of Nepal, female literacy rate (30 percent) is less than half of that of their male counterpart, health care for women is poor (70-80 percent anemic), and female population suffer from repression and confinement under the patriarchal structure (UNESCAP, 2001:28). In Pakistan, in addition to female illiteracy, women have lower social status and rights compared to the male population (UNESCAP, 2001:27). Similarly, in Sri Lanka, gender inequality exists within most families based on male domination; women's role is confined to household work; and they are largely excluded from political activities and community affairs due to male-biased assumptions (UNESCAP, 2001: 26-27).

The above scenario of gender divide in various arenas of economy, politics, and society is also reflected in local governance in South Asian countries. Although

women constitute about half of the population in these countries, they remain underrepresented in both national politics and local government institutions (UNESCAP, 1997). It was reported that in Bangladesh, although 33.3 percent local government seats were held by women, there was no female mayor, and they accounted for only 3.8 percent of senior management positions in local bodies (UNESCAP, 2001:17). Even after being elected, "women councilors continue to face de facto marginalization in the performance of their duties" (Slater and Preston, 2004; 17). In India, although there is an increase in the number of women elected for rural and urban councils (about one-third of the total number of elected representatives), there is still a significant degree of male domination (UNESCAP, 2001). With regard to these elected female representatives in local institutions, Mathew mentions that many of them come from affluent families; they are often relatives of high-level politicians; sometimes it is their husbands or fathers who actually manage local government affairs; and some of them have suffered from "exploitation, violence, and harassment" (Mathew, 2003).

In Nepal, the representation of women in local government institutions remains inadequate, although there is some progress made in recent years. Some studies showed that women accounted for 24.1 percent of total local government seats, they held only 2.3 percent senior management positions, there was one female mayor out of 14 in Municipal Councils, and there was no woman as chairperson in Urban Councils (UNESCAP, 2001:17; Wijetunge, 2001:236). For Wijetunge, such "statistics indicate that women's involvement in decision-making processes at all levels [of local government] is not satisfactory" (Wijetunge, 2001; 236). In the case of Pakistan, it was reported that out of 69,900 members in local councils, only 17,372 were women (Naz, 2001). A more dismal scenario of female representation can be

observed in Sri Lanka where the female representation was found to be 1.4 percent in Urban Councils and 2.3 percent in Municipal Councils (Gunatilake, 2001). The above description, information, and analysis demonstrate that women are still quite marginal in terms of their representation and participation in local government units in South Asian countries. As a result, despite decentralization and gender-related initiatives undertaken by various governments in the region, the female population is not in a position to hold local institutions accountable through elected female representatives.

Caste Divide and Local Accountability

In some South Asian countries, especially India, Nepal, and Sri Lanka, there is age-old problem of caste and race divide that affects almost every dimension of politics and governance at the national and local levels. The caste system represents a "rigid social hierarchy" of four major ranks within the population – including, from the highest to the lowest, the *Brahmins* (priests/teachers), the *Ksyatriyas* (rulers/soldiers), the *Vaisyas* (merchants/traders), and the *Shudras* (laborers/artisans) (HRW, 1999; Nayak, 1995). In addition, there is a fifth category outside this regular caste hierarchy, which is known as the *Dalits* or "untouchables", the most segregated and repressed section of the population in South Asia. In general, people's inborn position or identity in this caste system often determines their food, education, status, power, privilege, marriage, occupation, and social interaction (Nayak, 1995; Rana, 2000).

In India, the caste-based social divide is the most severe form of social exclusion based on rigid hierarchical structure. Millions of people who belong to the lower caste and untouchable categories, often work and live in slave-like conditions and suffer from poverty and illiteracy, whereas the upper-caste Brahmins are wealthy and powerful in society (HRW, 2001). It should be mentioned

that similar to the untouchables, the minority tribal groups constituting a considerable percentage of the Indian's total population (nearly 68 million), are outside the Hindu caste hierarchy, and they also suffer from abject living condition and extremely low social status (Rana, 2000). The caste divide is also prominent in Nepal and Sri Lanka. In Nepal, for example, it is the higher-caste citizens who dominate politics and administration at the national and local levels (Mahat, 2003). It is observed by Mahat that in Nepal, few high caste groups dominate all spheres of society, especially politics and administration, whereas the untouchables are extremely underrepresented in all major institutions of national governance (Mahat, 2003).

With regard to local government institutions, the caste divide can be observed in the serious under-representation, discrimination, and humiliation of lower castes, untouchables, and tribal minorities in these institutions. In the case of India, even under the new system of local government in favor of lower castes and untouchables, it is often difficult to conduct free and fair local elections – in many instances, the *Dalit* candidates cannot file nomination papers, because the powerful high-caste rural elite often threaten them, boycott the electoral process, and prevent the *Dalits* from voting for their candidates (Mathew, 2003). Even after getting elected, the *Dalit* local representatives may face considerable challenges posed by upper-caste villagers who do not treat these representatives with respect, humiliate them publicly by making them sit on the floor, and threaten them through violent acts (Mathew, 2003). In the above context, it is hardly possible in India to make local government institutions responsive to the needs of lower-castes and untouchables and make these institutions accountable or answerable to them. Local representatives from the scheduled castes and tribes cannot influence the local events, stop atrocities committed against their groups, and

have virtually no control over the local police favoring the upper castes (Mathew, 2002). Similarly, in the case of Nepal, due to the caste-based social divide, the lower castes have very minimal access to resources, and even when they participate in various activities, often they cannot express their needs (Timsina, 2002).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

It is explained in this article that although South Asian governments have taken initiatives to decentralize or transfer power from the state to local government in order to enhance local level responsiveness and accountability, such initiatives have not been that effective due to the serious problems of social divides in terms of income, gender, and caste. In most countries in the region, such social divides constrain the representation and effective participation of low-income families, women, and lower castes in local governance.

There is no doubt that in some South Asian countries, governments have adopted certain remedial measures to enhance the representation of women and lower-caste citizens in public governance at both the national and local levels. For instance, in Bangladesh, about 33 percent of seats in Municipalities and Union Councils are reserved for women (UNESCAP, 2001). Similarly, in Pakistan, 33 percent of local government seats are reserved for women and 20 percent for workers or peasants (UNESCAP, 2001). In the case of India, 33 percent seats in local government units are reserved for women; while for the Scheduled Castes and tribes, the number of reserved seats is proportional to their percentage in the overall population in respective local government areas (Montes, 2002: 60). In Nepal, there is now a provision of having 20 percent seats reserved for women in municipalities (Shrestha, 2001). Sri Lanka does not have

such a provision of reserved seats for the female and lower-caste population. In most of these countries, there is no provision to ensure the representation of the rural poor (especially the landless) in local government institutions.

Despite these provisions adopted by some governments in favor of women and the lower castes, their representation in local governance remain inadequate due to the social divides deeply embedded in rural structures and cultural and religious beliefs in South Asian countries. As discussed in this article, even when some people from these less privileged groups get elected and hold legitimate positions in local institutions, they remain too powerless to effectively participate in the decision-making process and to make these institutions accountable. As observed by Timsina, the realization of equity and justice in any institution or organization largely depends on social structure and power relation rooted in society (Timsina, 2002).

In South Asia, beyond the rhetoric of enhancing public participation and public accountability through decentralized local governance, there are many vested interests at the national and local levels who gain from decentralization in terms of generating rural support for the ruling party, managing grassroots resistance, opening opportunities for the rural elite, and so on (Parker, 1995; Rana, 2000). In this situation of the ineffectiveness legal and administrative provisions to ensure local participation and accountability and the need for greater social transformation, Montes suggests the following with special reference to the case of India:

> "There must be social restructuring in order to facilitate the entry and acceptance of women, the schedule castes, and tribes in local governments. There must be change in attitude among panchayat representatives in order to set genuine

decentralization in motion. Legislating participation is not enough. Social mores and structures must be altered to allow the political participation of women, caste, and tribes" (Montes, 2002:62).

REFERENCES

Amnesty International (2004). *Women's Human Rights Violence and Discrimination: India.* New York: Amnesty International USA.

Behar, A. and Y. Kumar (2002). *Decentralisation in Madhya Pradesh, India: From Panchayati Raj to Gram Swaraj (1995 to 2001).* Working Paper No.170, September, Overseas Development Institute, London.

Boex, J., P. Gudgeon, and R. Shotton (2002). *Role of UNDP in Promoting Local Governance and Decentralization in Bangladesh.* Report of the Initial SPPD Scoping Mission. New York: United Nations Development Programme.

Chattopadhyay, R. and E. Duflo (2003). *The Impact of Reservation in the Panchayati Raj: Evidence from a Nationwide Randomized Experiment.* Working Paper. Cambridge, MA: The Abdul Latif Jameel Poverty Action Lab.

CLGF (Commonwealth Local Government Forum) (2006a). *Country Profiles: Bangladesh.* London: CLGF. Available at: [http://www.clgf.org.uk/index_profiles.htm]

CLGF (Commonwealth Local Government Forum) (2006b). *Country Profiles: India.* London: CLGF. Available at: [http://www.clgf.org.uk/index_profiles.htm]

CLGF (Commonwealth Local Government Forum) (2006c). *Country Profiles: Pakistan.* London:

CLGF.   Available   at:
[http://www.clgf.org.uk/index_profiles.htm]
CLGF   (Commonwealth   Local   Government   Forum)
(2006d). *Country Profiles: Sri Lanka.* London:
CLGF.   Available   at:
[http://www.clgf.org.uk/index_profiles.htm]
Dainis, A.P. (1999). "Country Paper: Sri Lanka," in
UNESCAP (ed.), *Local Government in Asia and the
Pacific.* Bangkok: UN Economic and Social
Commission for Asia and the Pacific.
Dreze, J. and A. Sen (2002). "Democratic Practice and
Social Inequality in India." *Journal of Asian and
African Studies* 37(2): 6-37.
Gaiha, R. and V. Kulkarni (2002). "Panchayats,
Communities, and the Rural Poor in India." *Journal
of Asian and African Studies* 37(2): 38-82.
Gunatilake, M. (2001). "State of Women in Urban Local
Government Sri Lanka," in UNESCAP (ed.),
*Women in Local Government in Asia and the
Pacific.* Bangkok: UN Economic and Social
Commission for Asia and the Pacific.
Haque, M.S. (1997). "Editorial Introduction: Local
Governance in Developing Nations: Reexamining
the Question of Accountability." *Regional
Development Dialogue* 18(2): iii-xxiii.
HRW (Human Rights Watch) (1999). *Broken People:
Caste Violence Against India's 'Untouchables'.*
New York: Human Rights Watch.
HRW (Human Rights Watch) (2001). *Caste
Discrimination: A Global Concern.* New York:
Human Rights Watch.
Islam, N. (1999). "Country Paper: Bangladesh," in
UNESCAP (ed.), *Local Government in Asia and the
Pacific.* Bangkok: UN Economic and Social
Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

Mahat, R.S. (2003). "Democracy in a Plural Society: A Case of Nepal." Paper presented at the seminar on Pluralism, Democracy and Conflict Resolution, 20-21 February, New Delhi, India.

Mathew, G. (2002). *Panchayati Raj Institutions and Human Rights in India.* Geneva: International Council on Human Rights Policy.

Mathew, G. (2003). "Panchayati Raj Institutions and Human Rights." *PUCL Bulletin,* March. [http://www.pucl.org/Topics/Law/2003/panchayati-raj.htm]

Montes, R. (2002). "India: Panchayats--Decentralization to the Grassroots," in A.B. Brillantes and N.G. Cuachon (eds.), *Decentralization & Powershift: An Imperative for Good Governance.* Manila: Asian Resource Center for Decentralization, University of the Philippines.

Moscare, D.L.O. (2002). "Bangladesh: Decentralizing Governance," in A.B. Brillantes and N.G. Cuachon (eds.), *Decentralization & Powershift: An Imperative for Good Governance.* Manila: Asian Resource Center for Decentralization, University of the Philippines.

Nayak, P. (1995). "Economic Development and Social Exclusion in India," in A. De Haan and P. Nayak (eds.), *Social Exclusion and South Asia.* Geneva: International Labour Organization.

Naz, R. (2001). "Report of the State of Women in Urban Local Government Pakistan," in UNESCAP (ed.), *Women in Local Government in Asia and the Pacific.* Bangkok: UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

Parker, A.N. (1995). *Decentralization: The Way Forward for Rural Development?* Policy Research Working Paper No.1475, The World Bank, Washington, DC.

Poornima and V. Vyasulu (1999). "Women in Panchayati Raj: Grassroots Democracy in India--Experience from Malgudi." Paper presented at the Meeting on Women and Political Participation: 21st Century Challenges, 24-26 March, New Delhi, India.

Rana, M. (2000). "Democracy and Poverty in South Asia: Participation." Paper presented at South Asian Regional Workshop on Democracy and Poverty: A Missing Link?, 10-11 April, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Reyes, S. and W. Azizah (2002). *Quotas for Women for Legislative Seats at the Local Level in Pakistan.* Stockholm: International IDEA.

Rondinelli, D.A. (1983). "Implementing Decentralization Programmes in Asia: A Comparative Analysis." *Public Administration and Development* 3(3): 181-207.

Sainath, P. (1999). "Dalits & Human Rights : The Battles Ahead." *PUCL Bulletin,* June. Available at: [http://www.pucl.org/from-archives/Dalit-tribal/battles1.htm]

Shrestha, S.D. (2001). "Report on the State of Women in Urban Local Government Nepal," in UNESCAP (ed.), *Women in Local Government in Asia and the Pacific: A Comparative Analysis of Thirteen Countries.* Bangkok: UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific.

Silwal, U.K. (2003). "Need for Restructuring Local Bodies." *Kathmandu Post* (Nepal)*, 29 April.

Slater, R. and A. Preston (2004). "Local Governance and Service Delivery to the Poor: Bangladesh Case Study," in UNCDF (ed.), *Local Government Initiative: Pro-Poor Infrastructure and Service Delivery in Asia.* New York: United Nations Capital Development Fund.

SURF (South-Asia Sub-Regional Resource Facility) (2002). *Statistical Data & Citizens Surveys.* Islamabad, Pakistan: SURF.

Timsina, N.P. (2002). "Empowerment vis-à-vis Marginalisation: A Mix Response from the Decentralised Institutions for Sustainable Resource Management." Paper presented at the Bishkek Global Mountain Summit, 23-28 April, Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) (2002). *Human Development Report 2002*. New York: Oxford University Press.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) (2003). *Fiscal Transfer to Local Government in Bangladesh.* Dhaka, Bangladesh: UNDP.

UNDP (United Nations Development Programme) (2005). *Human Development Report 2005.* New York: Oxford University Press.

UNESCAP (UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) (1997). *Report of the Regional Workshop on Women in Urban Local Governments in South Asia, Allahabad, India*. Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCAP.

UNESCAP (UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), ed. (1999). *Local Government in Asia and the Pacific: A comparative Study of Fifteen Countries.* Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCAP.

UNESCAP (UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific), ed. (2001). *Women in Local Government in Asia and the Pacific: A Comparative Analysis of Thirteen Countries.* Bangkok, Thailand: UNESCAP.

Westergaard, K. (2000). "Decentralization in Bangladesh: Local Government and NGOs." Paper presented at the Colloquium on Decentralization and

Development, 7 April, Department of Political Science, Yale University, USA.

Wijetunge, K.H. (2001). "Sri Lanka." Paper presented at the APO Seminar on Effective Decentralization for Community Development, 23-31 March, Sri Lanka.

Winter, M. (2004). "Local Government Infrastructure and Service Delivery: A Case Study of the Decentralized Financing and Development Programme—Nepal," in UNCDF (ed.), *Local Government Initiative: Pro-Poor Infrastructure and Service Delivery in Asia.* New York: United Nations Capital Development Fund.

Zafarullah, H.M. and A.S. Huque (1998). "Public Management in South Asia: Dimensions and Directions of Change." *International Journal of Public Administration* 21(10): 1473-1498.