

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

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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. 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

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Inherited administrative tradition of Bangladesh shows a leaning toward centralized decision making structure. However, age of decentralization puts 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). The following sections reveal 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 sources. By using the theoretical lens developed by Hofstede (1991) the study explores the impact of social culture on the level of participation in the decision making approach.

Historical Overview of Bangladeshi Administrative Culture

The concept of administrative culture is abstract not a concrete one and it is a collective ascription of society (Khan, 1990). The unequal centralized structure and domination of elite in the administrative culture, inherited from the British and Pakistan era in Bangladesh, involved 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 the 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 form as part of the inherent culture.

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 intension 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 Awami 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).

The military ruled from 1975 to 1990 where power was 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 was 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 to 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. Power is still 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 also 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 centralized power used to solve problems and made decisions characterized by social rank and hierarchy. They believed in stability where the deviation from rules denotes immorality and disintegration among the society. Consequently, professional life merged with the personal life. Inherited tradition and personalized relationship between the employer and employee are 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).

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 at 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 80 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 norm. Studies by Jamil (2007) shows, the characteristics of preferred employee are good family background, moral charecteristics and obedience to employer. Thus social norms and cultural characteristics are reflected in Asian organizations (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 to 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 is

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 to 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 based 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 of 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.

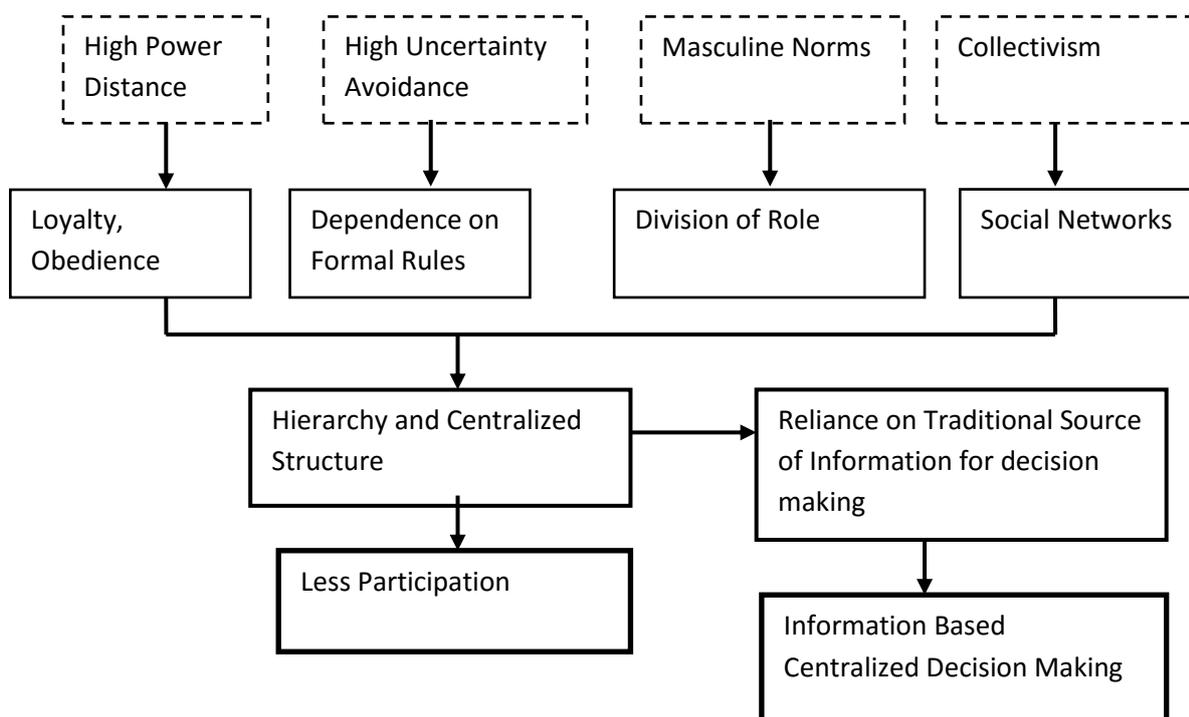


Figure 1: Impacts of institutions in participation and decision making approach

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 hierarchical 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 a centralized approach that is inherited from the British rule where the scope of participation of the stakeholders is 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 a 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 a 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.

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

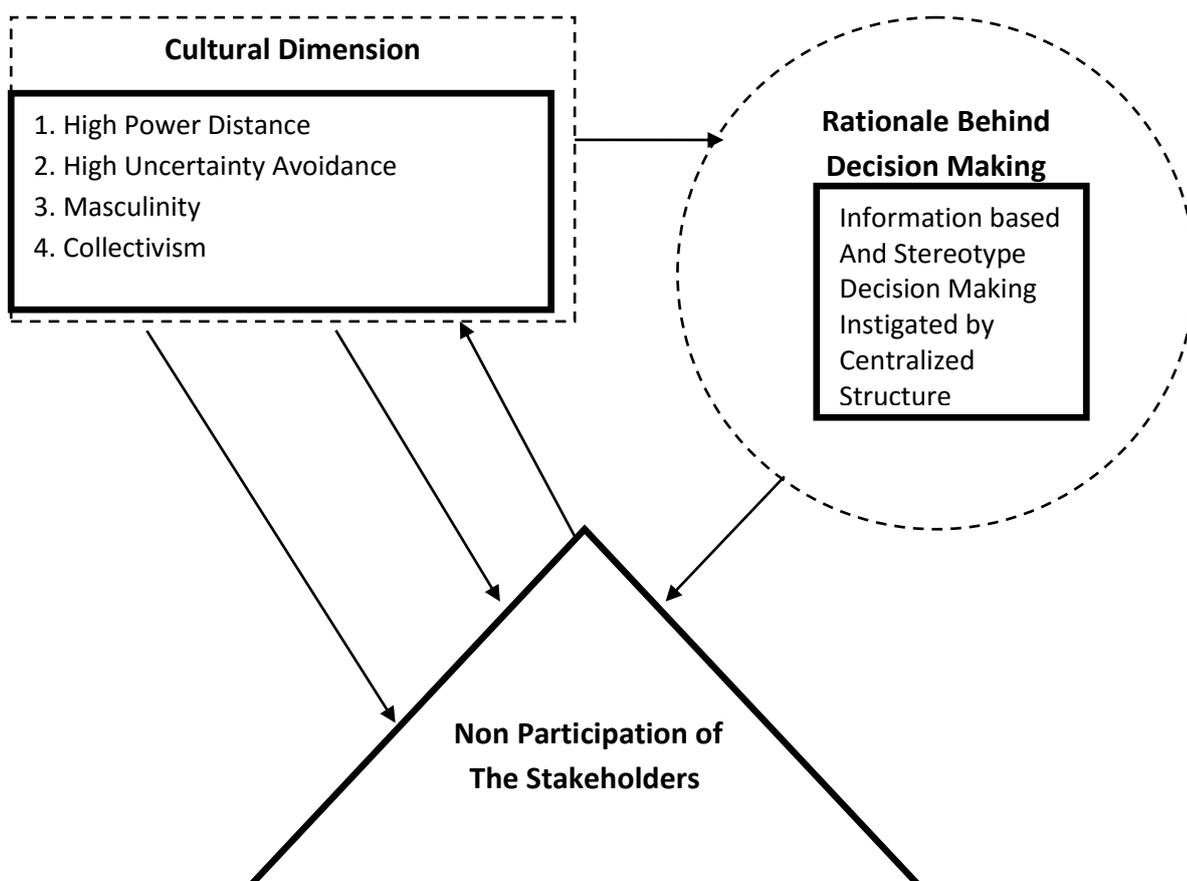


Figure 2: Influence of culture in decision making approach in Bangladesh

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.

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 the one hand, result 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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