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# Social Forestry Versus Social Reality: Patronage and Community- Based Forestry in Bangladesh

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Niaz Ahmed Khan

2001

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## Executive Summary

Social forestry has acquired great significance in Bangladesh as a strategy for both forest resource management and rural development. However, the local social relations and networks which dictate the performance of social forestry have largely been ignored by planners of social forestry projects. This paper examines one of the most dominant manifestations of such social relations, the patronage network, and its implications for the performance of social forestry in rural Bangladesh. Three case studies illustrate the varied and profound implications of the patronage network for the functioning of social forestry projects.

In these case study areas, farmers participating in social forestry projects (the clients or *Kamla*) have a deep-rooted dependency on the local elites (the patrons or *Murubbi*). The patrons are able to offer farmers employment opportunities, access to local government and protection during times of crisis and from harassment by other groups. The patrons, in turn, use the patronage network to influence the selection of the target farmers for the projects, to capture project benefits, and to use the farmers as support bases in local political and 'power' struggles. Social forestry intervention has done little to rescue farmers from these exploitative and unequal social relations, and their impact on social forestry's performance includes:

- the undermining of collective activities and community institutions;
- siphoning off of seedlings, fertilisers and other forestry inputs by patrons;
- a growing pattern of status-differentiation among the project farmers with negative implications for group solidarity and social mobility of the excluded; and ultimately,
- further marginalisation of the poorest households.

In conclusion the author urges those promoting social forestry in the region to be aware of the pervasive effects of the patronage network. He suggests that increasing income-generating opportunities for farmers, making extension services better and more accessible, increasing support for collective activities and clarifying land tenure status will all help farmers resist the pull of the patronage network.

# SOCIAL FORESTRY VERSUS SOCIAL REALITY: PATRONAGE AND COMMUNITY-BASED FORESTRY IN BANGLADESH<sup>1</sup>

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Niaz Ahmed Khan

## Introduction

Since the early 1980s there has been an unprecedented enthusiasm for social forestry (SF) in Bangladesh (Box 1). The government has attached the highest priority to SF, and it has become the dominant strategy in the country's forestry sector. The goals of SF are somewhat all-encompassing and, perhaps, over-ambitious. These goals most commonly include empowering 'the weaker sections' of local communities through active participation in the management and use of forests; promoting a cooperative structure to articulate the interests and voices of local people; meeting local forestry needs; and promoting self-sufficiency and social equity among local communities (see for example, Rahman, 1992; Task Force, 1987). To achieve some of these goals, SF also (directly or implicitly) aims to empower local people to free themselves from some of the social structures of dependency and exploitation. For example, the planners of one of my case study projects (Betagi) asserted: "*[the Betagi project] will rehabilitate the 'naked' [barren, deforested] hill with 'naked' [landless poor] people. It will show the potentials and strength of the landless people .. the farmers will join together [like] one family and strive towards autarky .. [they will also help themselves] to face all opposition from the claims of jotdars [large land-owning local elites] ..*" (Proceedings of a meeting on community forestry, Rangunia, 1979, translation).

### **Box 1. Social Forestry in Bangladesh**

In Bangladesh, in common with neighbouring south Asian countries, SF is used rather flexibly as an umbrella term for public, private and communal initiatives for ensuring "*active participation by the rural people in planning, implementation and benefit sharing of tree growing schemes*" (Task Force, 1987). SF is viewed here within the broader framework of rural development. It includes afforestation programmes in marginal and degraded state and communal forest lands; village woodlots; farm forestry; strip plantations alongside railways, highways and embankments; 'community plantations' on public or communal lands with joint management and benefit-sharing arrangements between the government and local communities; homestead forestry (homegardens); and varied other manifestations of agroforestry.

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was included in the Papers in International Development 19 (Centre for Development Studies, University of Wales, Swansea, 1996) for limited circulation. Similar views have also been explored in Khan (1998).

However, the unfavourable social context within which rural development projects, including SF, operate, often prevents these lofty goals from being fulfilled. A few studies have shown that grossly unequal and exploitative social relations and structures in rural Bangladesh enable local elites to dominate and manipulate rural development projects for their own benefit, excluding the weaker and poorer section of the community (see for example, Blair, 1978; Rahman, 1994). The implications of such social relations and structures for the performance of SF have remained virtually unexplored in Bangladesh and are by and large ignored by project planners.

SF is the mainstay of public forestry in Bangladesh and a good number of SF projects are currently being implemented including the Forestry Sector Project (1998-2004), Coastal Greenbelt Project (1995-2002), and the Sundarbans Biodiversity Conservation Project (1999-2006). Most projects have made commendable progress in achieving their physical goals such as plantation establishment, seedling distribution and associated infrastructure building. However, there has been limited success in meeting the social targets of public participation and equitable benefit distribution. Initial observations suggest that this is due to some obstructive social structures, especially the patronage system (for details see, Khan forthcoming). SF's performance is likely to be improved by analysing and addressing some of these social structures.

In this paper, I examine the implications of the patronage system (Box 2) for the performance of SF in Bangladesh. The patronage network has profound implications for the operation of SF in the field, and is a major impediment to fulfilling SF's main aims, especially its goals of empowering local people and fostering cooperative organisations to represent their interests and views.

### **Box 2. What are Patronage Networks?**

One of the seminal works on patron-client relations describes patronage as the "...ties involving largely instrumental friendship in which an individual of higher socio-economic status (patron) uses his own influence and resources to provide protection and/or benefits for a person of lower status (client) who for his part reciprocates by offering general support and assistance, including personal services to the patron." (Scott, 1972)

## **The Cases and the Methodology**

The fieldwork for the study focused on three Bangladeshi SF projects. Two of the projects (the Betagi SF Project and the Pomora SF project) are in Rangunia *Thana* (sub-district) in the district of Chittagong in the south-eastern hilly region of Bangladesh. The Betagi and Pomora projects were launched, respectively, in 1979 and 1980. At present, 82 and 152 'landless' farming households are participating in Betagi and Pomora. Each household was allotted four acres (1.62 ha.) of public wastelands<sup>2</sup> to be

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<sup>2</sup> *Denuded state lands under the purview of the government's Forest or Revenue Departments.*

developed through SF plantations. The third project (the Chandra Agroforestry Research and Demonstration Project) is a Ford Foundation-funded project in the Kaliakair *Thana* of the Gazipur district in central Bangladesh. The Chandra project, which became operational in May 1992, covers 60 acres, involving 40 households with a total population of 160 (each household is allotted 1.5 acres).

I selected these case study projects because they represent typical Bangladesh government SF projects and because they are all well-known in government and donor quarters. The Betagi and Pomora projects, for example, are reported to be the “*first systematic efforts*” in SF in the country (Rahman, 1992), and are widely acclaimed as ‘success stories’ by a sizeable literature (see for example, Alim, 1988; Rahman, 1992). They were also small enough (in terms of the geographical coverage and the number of participating farmers), to allow me to carry out the research within funding and time constraints.

A research assistant and I collected data between February 1994 and August 1994, during which time I lived in the study area intermittently. The main focus of data collection was on the relationship between social structures and the performance of SF. I used both quantitative and qualitative methods following the principles of ‘methodological pluralism’. We collected the quantitative data by questionnaire, selecting households using stratified random sampling. The sample sizes for Betagi, Pomora and Chandra were 24, 40 and 13 households respectively. We relied heavily on personal observation and ethno-historical analysis for the qualitative information. My long association with the study area proved invaluable in boosting the effectiveness of these qualitative methods.

## Patronage and Social Relations in Rural Bangladesh: A Review

In the agrarian and subsistence production systems of south Asian villages generally, patronage relations and structures are vital in determining who survives, on what terms, and to what extent a person will benefit from any development programme (Jansen, 1986).

In Bangladesh, in line with experience elsewhere in rural south Asia<sup>3</sup>, economic and social transactions in the agrarian production and distribution systems occur through a “*highly personalized*” patronage network (Zaman, 1984; also see Jansen, 1986; White, 1992; Rahman, 1994). Patrons provide leadership and serve as ‘brokers’ between villagers and the ‘outside world’, including mediating the distribution of government goods and services. In the distribution of such ‘public goods’, patrons exert their influence and control over local governments and other local organizations, and “*treat their followers preferentially*” (Zaman, 1984).

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<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Hobley, 1991; Arnold et al., 1990.

The patronage relationship is “*essentially unequal in character, involving domination and submission*” (Zaman, 1984). Although “*some reciprocity is involved*” in the relationship, “*the balance of benefits [typically] heavily favour the patron*” (Scott, 1972). This “*inequality*” is the “*key element*” in a patron-client relationship and it invariably involves “*the superiority of one over the other*” (Clapham, 1982). These relationships allow local elites to reinforce their power and position in the countryside; and to appropriate the principal benefits from development interventions. These relations also help to strengthen the vested alliance between the central elites (especially the ruling government) and their local partners. Recent studies of Bangladesh have re-emphasised the significance of understanding the profound implications of patronage relations in analysing development programmes and their surrounding social setting. White, for example, found that “*the key to understanding social and economic inequalities*” is “*to grasp the relations*” through which they are “*reproduced*” (1992). Similarly, Jansen (1986) suggested that “*competition for scarce resources*” occurs largely within the patronage network.

There are three main ways in which the patronage network affects the performance of SF:

1. Local people’s access to SF project design, management and benefits is largely regulated by such relations.
2. Patronage relations may constrain or bolster the growth of local level institutions (for example, a farmers’ cooperative) which are, in turn, crucial for institutionalising the process of popular involvement in SF.
3. Patronage relations can serve as a communication link between the government and the people, and among different resource use groups and interests. SF extension services and benefits are often channelled through and regulated by this relational network.

The caste hierarchy provides a structured framework and channel for the growth and smooth operation of the patronage links. Although not as rigid in nature as the traditional Indian caste system, in rural Bangladesh there are “*caste-like characteristics*” among the majority (Muslim) population (Tepper, 1976). In his empirical study on farm land afforestation in north-west India, Saxena found that caste was “*a greater barrier to tree growing than a lack of land...*” (1990). The higher caste farmers had performed well, both in the tree planting and the sale of products.

There may be several caste-related factors which influence the performance of SF:

1. The higher caste groups have greater access to education, and to the channels within the bureaucracy which enable them to tap the sources of credit, markets and public services necessary for SF.



2. The high caste affluent families can exploit their patronage network to diversify their income sources. They do not have to depend solely on agriculture or SF, and have access to varied non-farm businesses which enable them to wait till the trees are matured and commercially harvested from the SF plantations (Saxena, 1990).
3. The high caste groups can form their own support-base of clients through the patronage network. This in turn enables them to dominate local institutions. Biased leadership in local organizations and domination by high class or caste in the decisions and benefits of development projects (like SF) have been widely observed in south Asia. For example, Arnold *et al.* (1990) noted that the local institutions and the leadership are often biased in terms of class, caste and factions, and they have little capacity for managing joint property resources. That is one reason why the benefits of development programmes tend to trickle down to the target groups to such a small extent.

Thus, the complicated web of patronage relations and structures in Bangladeshi villages, which cuts across social and economic groups, largely shapes the impact and performance of development programmes like SF. The reality is that since these relations are largely unequal and exploitative, the benefits of development interventions tilt towards the upper echelon of society who are in control, or in alliance with those who control resources and power. The weaker sections are largely excluded from any major benefit-sharing arrangements, and have to remain happy with the titbits that they struggle to manage through their respective patronage links and ability.

## The Implications of Patronage for Social Forestry: Views from the Field

### Patrons and clients

In my study areas, most social and economic transactions between farmers and affluent villagers occur through a pervasive patronage network. Here the patrons are commonly called *Murubbi* (which could variedly connote an 'elderly and experienced person', 'guide', 'counsellor', 'protector', 'notable or respected individual'). The term *Kamla* (literally meaning a worker, labourer) represents a wide range of clients, including the sharecropping farmers, different forms of contractual or hired manual labourers and workers, family servants and household workers, and so on. In this paper, it is impossible to cover the varied manifestations of the patronage network. I will focus only on the dominant aspects of such dependency relations in the study areas.

Before discussing the implications of the patronage network, I shall briefly note the nature and characteristics of the patrons. The patrons constitute a range of rural elites who, with regional variations of wealth and social status, generally hold formal or informal power positions. They are groups (including small leadership groups) with "*considerable social influence*" (Bottomore, 1964), who can collectively manipulate the masses.

These patrons enjoy large-scale legal and *de facto* possession of land. They are widely connected to the local bureaucracy and political scene. Most are directly or indirectly involved in local politics, and therefore have access to local government positions. They are in possession of arms and paid cadres of ‘musclemen’ (*Mastans*). They are backed up by the support of a large family-lineage, and/or clan and client groups. Finally, they have diversified their occupational and socio-economic activities. These characteristic sources of power have also been observed in other regions of Bangladesh (eg., Ahmed, 1989).

There are some key factors which foster and sustain patron-client relations in the study areas.

1. A grossly unequal pattern of ownership and access to land immediately puts the controllers and owners of land in an elitist “*superordinate class*” (Kerkvliet, 1990). Though SF farmers have received land from the government, these plots are situated in hilly terrain unfit for agricultural purposes. Besides, there are ambiguity and conflict over the tenurial status of many plots which, in some cases, have resulted in litigations and lawsuits. Therefore, most farmers still depend on the patrons for work as agricultural labourers and sharecroppers in the patrons’ fields and for assistance in handling the litigations.
2. There is an acute scarcity of employment opportunities in these localities. Patrons control the limited employment opportunities including agriculture, timber and other businesses. The income from SF does not cover farmers’ annual expenses. In Betagi, Pomora and Chandra, 13 (54%), 27 (67.5%) and 8 (61.5%) farmers respectively were not meeting their household expenditure during 1993. Therefore, farmers compete for the limited employment provided by the patrons to supplement their income.
3. Corruption, procedural formalities and bureaucratic harassment limit farmers’ access to the public services and extension agencies for forestry, agriculture and livestock which are supposed to empower them. In the absence of this type of support, farmers turn to patrons for help.
4. Farmers also need political and physical protection from the local elites and their *mastans*, and from natural calamities and harassment by petty government officials. Being protected by a patron safeguards the farmer from possible oppression by other elites. On the other hand, patrons can “*extract labor, food, rents and interests from the farmers*” (Scott, 1985). Through the patronage links, patrons can ensure a loyal work-force which they can use in times of labour scarcity. They can also demand assistance in household chores and various other unpaid services. More importantly, patrons have a political support base in their respective clients during elections and during times of competition and contention with fellow elites (patrons).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> My observations about these catalytic factors for the establishment and consolidation of patronage networks are closely similar to the findings of many studies on rural Bangladesh (for example, Jansen 1986; Rahman 1994).

## Effects of patronage

To show how the patronage network functions and influences SF projects, I shall describe the power structure of Pomora village, which centres on a family-lineage called the Hafez *Paribar*<sup>5</sup> (family). This landed family has always been well-connected. Being *Chowdhuries*, the family enjoyed (and still enjoys) villagers' esteem and recognition. For many years the local political leadership has been confined to this family; however, in the face of increased political and social unrest throughout Bangladesh, the family has recently begun relying more on coercive forces, such as arms and *Mastans*. To meet the additional costs of maintaining these forces, they have diversified their income sources from agriculture and lands to include the timber trade, becoming contractors for various government works and urban-based small and medium-scale businesses. Similarly, they also have diverse political affiliations. The four chairmen of the local Union Council<sup>6</sup> are members of the three principal political parties in the country. Ideologically, these parties are poles apart, but the members of this lineage have successfully exploited their respective affiliation with these parties in retaining their power and hegemony for generations. Whenever the government changed they switched their loyalty, and managed to have one of their family members included in the local government structures of the new ruling party. They also have intimate connections with the *Thana* and district level officials of the different government departments. A number of young members of the family were educated at the Chittagong city-based colleges, establishing links with the district government. These links were further consolidated through the varied commercial businesses, when the family interacted more with the bureaucracy.

The Hafez family has profound influence on the functioning of local SF projects and the overall pattern of forestry use in the area. The principal patronage supports include monetary help, advice/counsel, providing security and occasional employment opportunities, and lobbying in the government offices (Table 1). Table 1 confirms the importance of lobbying local level government offices in all three study areas.

The provision of security and employment was the second most common patronage support in Pomora. The main employment opportunity for the clients (farmers) is as hired labour in commercial timber logging. Major patrons in the locality, including the Hafez family, are actively engaged in illegal logging with urban allies such as timber and furniture contractors. For poor villagers and SF farmers, this is an important source of income, given the limited sources of employment, especially in the off-peak agricultural seasons.

Many of my respondents (or their forefathers) have been associated with the Hafez family for generations as family servants, workers, share-croppers and political party workers. During land distribution and the selection of farmers for the SF project, the

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<sup>5</sup> In all cases, pseudonyms have been used.

<sup>6</sup> Union is the lowest tier of the local government structure in Bangladesh, below *Thana* (sub-district) and district. It is headed by a Chairman elected by universal adult franchise.

**Table 1. Nature of the most commonly solicited patronage supports (as reported by the project farmers)**

Nature of support	Betagi (24 households)		Pomora (40 households)		Chandra (13 households)	
	No. respondents	%	No. respondents	%	No. respondents	%
Monetary	4	16.7	5	12.5	4	30.8
Advice/counsel	5	20.8	4	10	1	7.7
Approaching government offices	12	50	21	52.5	7	53.85
Providing security and employment	3	12.5	10	25	1	7.7

Source: Data collected by the author in 1994.

family recommended many of their long-acquainted clients for lands (the farming plots). It may be noted that the Union Chairman, one of the family, was an influential member of the *Thana* Selection Committee, responsible for selecting the farmers for SF. In the process, some fairly rich people, with the 'blessing' of the Hafez family, also entered the project as fake 'landless' people. For example, Azam (who has nearly 10 acres of land), managed to get a plot in the project through the local Chairman by virtue of his long affiliation with the family. Today, Azam holds a dominant position in the Pomora SF project and heads one of the contending factions of the farmers. He, to return the favour, serves as a "vote bank" (Rahman, 1994) for his patron, the local chairman, at elections. When relief is distributed the chairman patronises a very select group of people (his clients), which includes Azam and his factions.

The situation in Betagi and Chandra mirrors that of Pomora, with patrons exerting varying influence and control over SF projects. As in Pomora, the selection of project farmers was largely facilitated through patronage networks. Three Union Council officials (Members) selected 70 farmers in Betagi alone (out of a total of 82 from local villages (Proceedings of Thana Selection Committee's meeting, 4th June 1979).

### Contentions and control

The main patrons (with their respective factions) compete among themselves to establish control over the SF projects. This has caused strife inside the projects and led to the emergence of corresponding factions among the project farmers (Box 3). Each patron uses his allied group (or faction) in the project to support him in factional contentions and village power struggles. The patrons consciously attempt to impede the growth of any collective activity or institution among the farmers in the project areas.

### Box 3. Patronage, Factions and Contentions

The current and previous Union council chairmen maintain and patronise two dominant farmers' factional groups in the Betagi SF project known as the 'Nurul' and 'Ahmed' *dal* (groups). There are 23 and 18 members in the two groups respectively. Before joining the project, Nurul, the leader of one group, used to work for his patron, the then chairman, in the illicit timber logging business. The chairman was key in selecting Nurul as a participant for the SF project, despite being better-off than most of the other candidates. In the project he now acts as an agent for his patron in distributing mainly two benefits to his group members (farmers): hiring them as waged labourers in timber logging and share-cropping in agriculture. Acting on behalf of the current chairman, the other group leader, Ahmed, preferentially distributes public relief goods (e.g. food stuff, house building materials, clothing) to his loyal members. Both these patrons are actively involved in local politics and hope to create an electoral support base in the project area. The competition and confrontation between these groups include spying on each other, campaigning for their respective patron(s) during elections, registering formal complaints against rival groups to the concerned offices (e.g. to forest office about logging) and holding exclusive meetings.

Besides exploiting the farmers as a support-base and as contract labourers, the patrons also capture some of the benefits especially designed for the SF projects (Box 4). For example, in Betagi and Chandra most of the inputs (seedlings and fertiliser) which the government provided free to SF farmers as an incentive, were siphoned off by the patrons. In Betagi, rich patrons took up the innovative agroforestry technology especially developed for SF farmers by forest scientists at the Bangladesh Forest Research

### Box 4. The 'Bubble Up' of Benefits

Rajjak Ali, a farmer from the Pomora SF project, received some good quality seedlings (of *Tectona grandis* and *Eucalyptus camaldulensis*) and poultry birds, free of charge, from the government extension and research agencies. However, rather than use these resources, he gave them to his patron (a local saw-mill owner). The trees and livestock can still be seen on the patron's homestead. Rajjak explains why: "*last year I was moving from door to door to get some money [loan] for marrying my daughter off ... I even went to the bank for a loan; they asked me to get two referees and collateral ... I am a poor man—who is going to take responsibility for me? ... Poor people are always alone. Then I went to see Mr. Fazal [the patron]. I [used to] work for his [saw]mill before ...; my wife also sometimes gives a hand in his household chores. He gave me some money [as] loan ... I shall have to bring timber for his [saw]mill from the forest for a 20 days until he says that 'the loan is over and you do not owe me [any more]' ... I gave the trees and chicken to him. He gave me money ...; I am a poor man; I can not offer much ... [Besides] these are bideshi [foreign, alien] chicken; they eat special 'powder' food [which is] very expensive; these birds are foolish too—the foxes can easily grab them in these hills...*"

Institute. The patrons acquired the knowledge from their clients in the project, and successfully used it in their own plantations. This 'silent' transfer of technology was facilitated by mutual understanding between patrons and clients. In the inequitable social order of Bangladesh, such 'bubble up' of benefits (from the rural development interventions) has been widely observed (see for example, Hartmann and Boyce, 1983; Rahman, 1994).

The government's attempts to evict fake 'landless' farmers from the project largely failed due to patronage-protection and factional politics. For example, in 1992 an eviction attempt failed because landless farmers opposed the government and supported their rich neighbours instead. After a series of interviews and informal talks, I realized that this was yet another manifestation of the patronage politics. The patrons did not come to the fore this time; instead they manipulated their poor clients to frustrate the government's bid and thereby safeguarded their integrity and authority.

Involvement in the timber trade has brought patrons, government officials and urban entrepreneurs into contact, resulting in an intensification of the relational network of patronage and extraction. In the process, there has been an alliance, according to Wood (1994), between the "*rich peasants and petty bourgeois*", which commands resource distribution in the countryside and the members of this alliance "*have become agents of the state*". The farmers appeal to their respective patrons to resolve factional conflicts among themselves or with other elites. They also seek help from patrons who have regular contact with local officers to approach government officials who otherwise remain inaccessible to the farmers.

## Status, Patronage and SF

Though labelled as a "*landless group, participating in SF for collective improvement*" (Proceedings of the Betagi Bhumiheen Samity<sup>7</sup>), the SF farmers are by no means a uniform community. As noted by Kervliet for the Philippines, "*Society is .. not simple.. There can be considerable competition among people of the same class. For instance, landless workers scramble over each other to get scarce work, small business people take customers from rivals, peasants upstream steal water from others whose fields are downstream, .. buyers try to deprive competitors of grain sales.*" (Kervliet, 1990).

Joining in the SF project and thereby owning land have given farmers' increased status and social recognition. They can exploit this social credibility to carve out a few (indirect) benefits (Box 5).

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<sup>7</sup> Literally meaning 'landless (farmers') cooperative'. This institution is responsible for day-to-day activities of farmers in the Betagi and Pomora projects. In Chandra no such farmers' institution exists, and the project activities are carried out by the local forest office.

### **Box 5. The 'Indirect' Benefits of SF: Farmers' comments**

*"Now that I have a piece of land when I walk by the haat [rural market], people call me, greet me [and] ask whereabouts ... None used to look at me before ..."*

*"I am an old man ... Last year I got my daughter married off to a bhala [sound, promising] boy [who] works in a large furniture shop in the city ... I told him, "when I die, you will get the land as my son-in-law" ..."*

*"After I have joined this [SF] project, I can go to various [government] offices; officers talk to me ..."*

*"The mohazon [informal money lender] now gives me loan; [it was] impossible [before]. He says "you have land, so you can take the money .. no problem"*

Some farmers also claim superior social status based on their lineage or family heritage and their linkage with powerful patrons. They like to build relationships with outside villagers of equal family background. In the initial years of the projects in Betagi-Pomora, poverty and land-hunger brought the farmers onto a temporary unified platform. But as they improve their financial position, farmers try to increase their status and social recognition, often degrading (or ignoring) fellow farmers, and thereby undermining group solidarity. I met a Betagi farmer (a *Chowdhury*) employing a hired labourer to work in his garden, though I was told that he was a daily labourer himself prior to joining the SF project. Hiring a labourer reflects increased status for the household. Marriage is another area where status-differentiation manifests itself. With increased solvency, farmers are able to marry their sons/daughters to wealthier and higher-status families. At least 15 of the Betagi farmers have established marital connections with families of higher social status, and thereby they seem to have upgraded their status as well.

This pattern of status-differentiation has profound implications for the working of SF, in terms of the farmers' group solidarity, and social mobility and recognition. The low-status farmers, for example, are discouraged from participating and talking freely in the SF group meetings and discussions in the presence of their high-status colleagues. High-status farmers have better access to farmers' cooperatives, local government and SF project offices. Furthermore, while offering scarce employment opportunities and protection, the patron would typically favour kin, close acquaintances and relatively better-off farmers for a number of reasons. First, helping the kin is a social obligation; it also enhances his benevolent image and social recognition. Second, as one patron told me: *"if you need to put oil on one's hair, it is always better to go for someone who has already got some oil on his hair; [because] he will require less oil"*. Trying to help the poorer farmers requires an effort which the patrons are not interested in making. Third, a patron does not want to lose a stronger farmer, fearing that he might join a rival group and strengthen his (the patron's) opponent's position.

During informal discussions, I noted that farmers are not naive or ignorant about the society in which they live. As other researchers have also observed (for example, Kervliet, 1990; Scott, 1985; Jansen, 1986), they were well aware of the processes of exploitation integral to their lives, of “*the considerable inequalities and of where everyone is positioned*” (Kerkvliet, 1990). But they still maintain their allegiance to the power holders and patrons for reasons discussed above. The logic, however, was most astutely summarised to me by a SF farmer (who received primary education and some formal training from the Forest Department) in a local tea-stall, where we used to meet in the evenings and chat for hours:

*“You can’t fight with a Kumir (crocodile) when in water .. Besides if you don’t have a boat, the [crocodile], if he is in a good mood, can even help you cross the river on his back ! .. and more importantly, if you are a friend of the [crocodile], smaller lizards won’t harm you.”*

## Everyday Resistance

Farmers have subtle ways of protesting against the various forms of exploitation they face daily. They go for “*low profile techniques*”, what Scott terms the “*everyday forms of resistance*” (1985; also see Kerkvliet 1990). Such ‘everyday resistance’ in my study areas commonly includes foot dragging, false compliance, back-biting, character assassination, jokes and puns, and minor pilferage. The farmers seldom attempt to make more stubborn or organised forms of resistance. First, farmers lack the institutional base for overt unified defiance. Second, the strife and divisions among the farmers reduce the opportunity for collective action. Third, the risks of getting into open confrontation with the patrons are too high for the farmers. “*Murubbis are everywhere*”, one farmer told me, and the punishment, mainly losing additional income sources and physical and mental harassment, can be severe. Fourth, the limited patronage benefits that the farmers receive are “*sufficient to ensure that [they] choose to conform in most respects to the standard of seemly behavior that is defined and imposed by the village elite*” (Scott, 1985). Fifth, as I have repeatedly noted, farmers ceaselessly compete among themselves for scarce resources from patrons. “*Poverty, itself, therefore, inhibits [them] to openly confronting the rich [patrons]*” (Kerkvliet, 1990). Thus, farmers have little recourse beyond vocabulary, gossip, idiom, and discussion among themselves; “*simply because they are too vulnerable to do more and are divided*” (Kerkvliet, 1990).

Patronage links are not infallible or static; rather they are continuously being shaped and reshaped as situations change. For example, the degree of intimacy in a patronage relationship fluctuates substantially over time. A patron may choose to select new clients from the farmers; or farmers can also switch sides in response to better prospects. Farmers, especially the poorer ones, however, cannot avail themselves of this opportunity so easily; primarily because the risks and initial repercussions of changing sides are sometimes too strong for them to sustain.



## Conclusions and Policy Implications

Patronage relations are deeply ingrained in the social fabric of the study areas. They have profound implications for forestry resource use in general, and the achievements of SF in particular. From the above experience, four broad conclusions can be drawn.

1. SF intervention has brought about little change in the nature, patterns and implications of the patronage network. The SF farmers are still under the heavy influence of the patrons; and they have to perform within limits set by the patronage network. SF has done little to free the farmers from manipulation by the network.
2. Patronage relations have partially benefited the better-off SF farmers in terms of increased status and increased opportunities for additional income. The patrons have extracted a variety of benefits (in the form of unpaid labour, servile works and political support) from an unequal exchange. The poorer farmers have lost out in competition with the better-off farmers to tap the benefits from the patronage sources, and have consequently been marginalised further.
3. The patronage relations restrict the growth of cooperation and collaborative initiatives in the study areas, thereby frustrating one of the major goals of SF. The factional politics, inter group conflicts and divisions among the farmers, which are fuelled by the patronage dominance, disrupt group solidarity and reduce the chance of inter-farmer cooperation. Farmers actively engage in factional politics, modelled on the broad pattern of power politics in the villages. In addition, there is a growing pattern of status-differentiation among the project farmers with negative implications for group solidarity and social mobility of the excluded.
4. The patronage network enables the patrons to consolidate their power and position, and serves as leverage to manipulate the SF project (and the participating farmers). These relations also provide the patrons with an avenue to appropriate a substantial share of the benefits from SF and to exclude the more deprived.

There is no magic solution that can instantly eradicate the problems of such a deep-rooted social structure as the patronage network. However, this is not to suggest that ameliorative attempts are useless; it is indeed imperative that we continue to explore possible ways forward for improving the performance of SF. On several occasions, I discussed these issues with the respondent farmers. Drawing on these discussions, coupled with my own experience, I feel that the following ideas may be considered by the authorities concerned, especially policy makers.

As the preceding text suggests, the farmers' great dependence on the patrons is mainly attributable to two factors:

1. Farmers' economic vulnerability due mainly to limited scope for income generation; and

## 2. Farmers' residual degree of collective activity and cooperation.

In this context, the following actions are needed:

- I noted earlier that limited opportunities for income-generation and employment force farmers to depend on the patrons. Micro-credit based income-generation could reduce this dependency considerably. The government could help target such micro-credit services to small farmers. A number of specialised banks, such as the Bangladesh Krishi (agriculture) Bank and the Grameen (rural) Bank, already exist near the project area. Most farmers can not access these institutions, mainly because they can not meet the collateral requirements or cope with the corrupt and complicated procedural formalities associated with sanctioning a bank loan. With a policy directive from the central government, the services of these institutions could be made available for the farmers (initially on an experimental basis).
- The growth and consolidation of collective activities will help to empower the farmers. This has been undermined by the patronage system and the competition amongst farmers for scarce resources. However, increased supervision and vigilance by project authorities would help nurture at least some collective activities, such as (farmers') regular group meetings, rallies, open discussions, joint training programmes and participation in voluntary (community) work in the project area. In addition, income generating schemes will help lessen competition for scarce resources.
- Clearly defined land tenurial status would give farmers greater social recognition and power. As noted earlier, insecurity of land tenure makes farmers more vulnerable to patronage influence. The government therefore needs to make a concerted effort to remove all uncertainty and ambiguity regarding land ownership. This could be done, for example, by clearly demarcating plots following a fresh land survey, instructing the local land administration and police offices to listen to farmers' views and problems, requesting the local judiciary to deal rapidly with land-related litigations and lawsuits, and arranging dialogue and discussions between farmers and local elites over disputed land.

The present public extension services, especially for agriculture, forestry, community health and education, are clearly inadequate and inefficient. Most households remain beyond the 'service coverage area' of the extension services. Besides, bribery and bureaucratic formalities restrict farmers' access to these services. Close monitoring and vigilance from the superior (line) authorities, as the common experience suggests, can improve the quality of extension service delivery considerably. Such services, coupled with vocational training in income generating enterprises, are vital for better performance of the project and empowerment of farmers. With increased support from public extensions services and improved financial status, farmers will be in a better position to resist patronage influences.

- At certain times, such as during local government elections, farmers are especially vulnerable to exploitation by patrons. It may be a good idea to involve specialised external agencies, such as the human rights and electoral monitoring agencies, to monitor the situation in the field at these times.
- Farmers largely depend on patrons for accessing and lobbying the various local government offices (Table 1). During the fieldwork, we occasionally observed that the vigilance of higher line authorities and the interest and intervention of the local Member of Parliament, can make these offices relatively more responsive to farmers' needs and problems. However, unless a regular system of central and integrated monitoring can be devised, services of local offices are most likely to remain limited, preferential and temporary.

In sum, a vigilant and probing eye on the social setting of SF is particularly important at the present time, when the emphasis on SF is greater than ever before. Being aware of these social relations and structures will be essential to help planners design more realistic social forestry interventions.

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