

End of a colonial system

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With the upgradation of 37 thanas into upazilas in the 8th phase of the government's administrative decentralisation programme on Monday last, Bangladesh bade farewell to the nearly five-century old thana based administrative system of rural Bangladesh.

The new system, which provides for an elected Chairman, to be head of local government, symbolises a new era in the country's administrative system in so far as it lays the foundation of a true democracy in rural Bangladesh. With the coming of the upazilas, the colonial administrative system characterised by exploitation of man by man fades away — giving place to a democratic and production oriented, egalitarian system of administration suited to the needs of an independent country.

History has it on record that the just-discarded thana-based administrative system was developed during the time of the Mughals, which was later modified by the British Raj to meet its own colonial ends. The primary consideration for the development of the administrative system for the central authority in Delhi during the Mughals was to ensure collection of revenue from the vassals of these areas and for the vassals of these unity to ensure greater collection of revenue through maintenance of his suzerainty over the area.

The first known attempt at streamlining the administration was made by Alauddin Hussain Shah in the middle of the 15th century. He developed administrative units known as Dewan Khana — later known as Thanas — in an attempt to ensure collection of revenues, at the same time maintaining his control over the area he held through administration of justice.

Simultaneously, various other systems of organisations

THANA UPAZILA

also evolved in other parts of the Mughal empire in accordance with the needs of effectively governing these areas — like the Pargana System in Bengal. These local systems under feudal rulers like the zamindars enjoyed greater measures freedom, until the British Raj laid its hands on them. One first instance was abolishing of the parganas and developing, in its place, the thanas.

The thanas gradually developed into administrative units meant primarily for ensuring revenue collection, maintenance of law and order and effective central control. These units, headed by the Officer-in-Charge of the police station, came more to symbolise the power and authority of the power that be than anything else. Conceptually it was devoid of anything in the nature of development efforts with local participation, dispensation of justice or democratic rights of the rural masses of people.

Implementation of the decision of the government under the leadership of Chief Martial Law Administrator, Lt.

Gen H. M. Ershad to decentralise administration, therefore, marked the fulfilment of the long cherished expectations of the people for bringing an end to colonial administration and building up a new Bangladesh.

The new system is designed to bring administration closer to the people and ensure direct participation of the people in not only local government but also formulation and execution of development programmes. The system would also help quick dispensation of justice — the long felt need of the people.

With the upgradation of all 397 rural thanas into upazilas on Monday last, the CMLA's pledge, made on November 7, 1982, was redeemed.

In the 9th and last phase of the decentralisation programme, 68 urban thanas in district and sub-divisional headquarters would be upgraded as upazilas on November 21.

The status of 12 thanas in Dhaka city, six in Chittagong city and one each in Tongi, Rajshahi and Khulna would be decided later by the government.