Land, development and the political class: In a translocal *'Londoni'* village

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This article expands Akhil Gupta's (1995, American Ethnologist, *22(2), 375–402) thesis of 'blurred boundaries' between 'the state' and 'society' in South Asia to incorporate the impact of historic labour migrations, which complicate established conceptions of the state in Bangladesh. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in an area of high migration to the UK, the article draws attention to a class of transnational politicians, and their intra-class conflicts of interest, in shaping local-level politics. The article supports Faguet's (2017,* Modern Asian Studies *51(6), 1668–94) contention that the decentralisation of local government has led to the emergence of vernacularised political economies that operate in the shadow of the state, which are also intrinsically facilitated by it. It suggests that state actors appropriate symbols, offices and resources, together with traditional authority and kinship dynamics, to create an idiosyncratic polity. Aspiration towards power that might lead to the occupation of state offices are determined by either the aspirant's status as a British citizen (*Londoni) *or through intimate social and economic connections to Britain through kinship (*gushti) *networks. The article thus makes a broader contribution to the existing literature on the anthropology of the state, transnational politics and the nexus of power, money and migration in postcolonial contexts.*

I
Introduction

This article expands Gupta's (1995) thesis of 'blurred boundaries' between 'the state' and 'society' in South Asia to incorporate the impact of historic labour migrations in producing localised forms of governance,

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which complicate established conceptions of the state. Based on ethnographic fieldwork in an area of high migration to the UK, the article draws attention to a political class of *Londoni* landowners, and their intra-class conflicts of interest, in shaping local-level politics and service delivery. It should be noted, however, that the presence of such remittance-based communities is not new nor novel in Bangladesh. Accordingly, the article supports Faguet's (2017) contention that the decentralisation of local government in the democratic era has led to the emergence of diverse or vernacularised local polities that operate in the shadow of the state, which are also intrinsically facilitated by it.

I suggest that the local elite, motivated by mutual and contradictory interests regarding both their own social mobility, through illicit accumulation, and altruism through 'development' initiatives, appropriate state symbols, offices and resources, together with mobilising traditional authority and kinship dynamics, to create an idiosyncratic polity that is particular to the region. I suggest that, in this fieldwork context, any aspiration towards power that might lead to the occupation of state offices, is determined by either the aspirants' status as a British citizen (*Londoni*) or through intimate social and economic connections to Britain through kinship (*gushti*) networks. The article thus makes a broader contribution to the existing literature on the anthropology of the state, transnational politics and the nexus of power, money and migration in postcolonial contexts.

I attempt to draw out these processes at work in the village I am calling Gulapbari, where much of my fieldwork was conducted between 2013 and 2015, and sporadically since. During this time, a number of significant political developments transpired in the village that eventually led to the union chairman stepping down at the end of his third term, despite remaining relatively popular with the electorate. He was immediately replaced by another wealthy man from a neighbouring village, who also maintained strong links to the UK diaspora. In fact, in Gulapbari, most villagers are either directly related to a Londoni household through kin networks or maintain patron–client relations with them, a dynamic I shall return to a little later. What is paramount for our purposes here, however, is that the dependence on the state is secondary to social reliance on a conglomeration of Londoni households (*gushtis*) and their figureheads who, in this part of Bangladesh, function and act as employment, welfare and development providers, working *in parallel* with the state (Gardner and Ahmed 2009).

Moreover, locals prefer the benefits that accrue from Londoni patrons over state mechanisms, due to the speed, efficiency and relative certainty of 'getting things done' (Michelutti 2010), and thus maintaining the traditional structure of 'social harmony' (cf. Berger this issue). And yet, interestingly, such patrons either work within the state or appropriate its established symbols and procedures, in order to demonstrate their power and legitimacy (*komota*), contemporary relevance and elevated social status. Londoni patrons engage in philanthropic and social protection services and so gain trust (*bhishash*) and respect (*shomman*) within the community (*samaj*), in contrast to the prevalent derogatory attitude towards the state. The social and political impact of transnational politicians and social benefactors, largely unrealised in the anthropological literature on the state in South Asia, and particularly Bangladesh, is explored in this article.

Fuller and Benei suggest that the state in India 'does not consist of an "actual organisation" separated from society' (2001: 22), but a bricolage of internalised ideological discourses and vernacularised historically contingent practises, enacted in intimate and familiar local settings. In Bangladesh, as we shall see, state actors—who are invariably embedded participants in their localities—are bestowed with the task of providing 'services' (*samaj-sheba*) (read: 'development' in the Bangladeshi context) for the common good. Gupta (1995) emphasises the importance of transnational forces shaping both the cultural construction and the bureaucratic practices of the state. His wider argument is supplemented with the view that the state is symbolically represented through a set of cultural practices that cannot be contained by national boundaries. Rather, localised ideologies 'compete for hegemony' with 'transnational flows of information, tastes, and styles…' (ibid.: 377). He goes on to state that:

> […] any theory of the state needs to take into account its constitution through a complex set of *spatially* intersecting representations and practices. This is not to argue that every episode of grassroots interaction between villagers and state officials can be shown to have transparent transnational linkages; it is merely to note that such linkages have structuring effects that may overdetermine the contexts in which daily practices are carried out. Instead of attempting to search for the local-level or grassroots conception of the state as if it encapsulated its own reality and treating "the local" as an unproblematic and coherent spatial

unit, we must pay attention to the "multiply mediated" contexts through which the state comes to be constructed. (ibid. original emphasis)

Although scholars have been keen to highlight the discursive and structural influence of transnational corporations and development non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in Bangladesh (Ahasan and Gardner 2016; Berger 2017; Hussain 2013; Karim 2011; Lewis 2011; Salehin 2016), there has been comparatively little interest in the role of transnational kin and village networks in shaping local-level polity in areas with high international migration and a consequent reliance on remittance-based patronage (cf. Gardner 1995; Gardner and Osella 2003). Gardner (2008) working in the Londoni Belt, has argued that transnational connectivity between economically precarious households in Bangladesh with affluent kin and community members in the UK and the Gulf, is an assured means of attaining financial and social 'security'.

On the other hand, 'for those families settled in Britain, another form of transnational connectedness takes place in which the political insecurity and social exclusion experienced in diaspora are offset by economic and social investments in the [homeland]' (ibid.: 477). This dyadic flow of remittances in exchange for 'social capital', however, has led to an economic boom in the region, far outlasting the much-feted growth at the national level. It has also resulted in the emergence and consolidation of a Londoni elite and their local-level vassals in the political affairs of village life, to the extent that these groups represent a de facto parallel structure to the state, particularly in the delivery of welfare and development services. This article attempts to explore this process from an ethnographic perspective, and in so doing, it calls into question the merits of methodological nationalism as an analytical tool in the theorisation of the state (Amelina et al. 2012; Freitag and von Oppen 2010).

Migration has shaped local-level dynamics in both the sending and receiving countries. Such dynamics are produced through 'a series of economic, sociocultural, and political practical and discursive relations that transcend the territorially bound jurisdiction of the nation-state' (Guarnizo 1997: 9). The privileged status of migrants is usually generated through the attainment of economic and cultural mobility, which often translates into political influence in the local affairs of the sending country. The latter phenomenon is usually encouraged by the respective governments in out-labour countries, and it is seen as a form of political and economic investment.

Alejandro Portes points out that 'governments of the sending nations have started to perceive their expatriate communities as a source of investments, entrepreneurial initiatives, markets for home country companies and even political representation abroad' (Portes 1999: 467). Similarly, successive Bangladeshi governments have supported expatriate investment into the country, recognising the substantial contribution of foreign remittances in fuelling economic growth. Moreover, major political parties have established branches in countries with a significant diaspora presence, including the UK, where Bangladeshi political parties are particularly active in campaigning, recruiting and fundraising, (see Visser this issue). This convivial relationship between the state and its diaspora has facilitated the creation of a particular social group in Sylhet that has appropriated and syncretised modern state symbols and processes, popular discourses of development and traditional kin-based patrilineal authority, to create a powerful political class and a unique translocal polity.

II
A dispute between equals

The union chairman was an enigma to all those who knew him, as well as to those who did not. In his late 50s, he separated his time between the city of Newcastle, in the north-east of England (where his first wife and children lived) and his ancestral village, in the north-east of Bangladesh (where his second, much younger wife and their children lived). This arrangement regularly brought out the ire of villagers, many of whom christened him the 'absent chairman' in their frustration. While the chairman was in England, his first cousin—an elected councillor and appointed deputy—would act on his behalf and under his remote direction, as would the other councillors. Upon his return, his homestead would often be flooded with poor villagers patiently seeking his counsel or signature for official documentations. I was regularly told by my informants that he should not be a politician of any rank, let alone the leader of a large rural constituency.

Mahmood Chairman, as he was also known, was thought to be too 'simple' (*shorol*) and 'slow-witted' (*shidah*) to be entangled in the cutthroat world of village politics, according to most of his constituents; the same constituents who, rather paradoxically, had overwhelmingly voted him in thrice. They were not dissuaded by the chairman's violent stammer

either, which, very inconveniently for him, always seemed to inflame whenever he was tasked to speak publicly—another political faux pas in the spectacle- and performance-driven world of Bangladeshi politics and the region more broadly (Michelutti et al. 2019). Mahmood Chairman went against all the established norms of what it took to be a politician in wider Bangladesh. In addition to his lack of cunning and challenges while communicating, he was not particularly charismatic, was never a student activist, did not come from a political dynasty, and zealously avoided all forms of confrontation, violent or otherwise. The two crucial attributes he did possess, however, were wealth and honesty. He was perceived as incorruptible as he was rich and that, seemingly, made all the difference.

The chairman was the head of what I am calling Mansabpur Union, an area of largely fenland, paddy fields, villages and hamlets stretching for approximately 20 sq. km. It is situated in the heart of what has become known as the 'Londoni Belt' in the Sylhet region of Bangladesh (Gardner 1995). The 'Londoni Belt' gets its name from the high proportion of British-Bangladeshis who migrated from there to the UK (which is commonly known as 'London' in Sylhet), and who maintain intimate links with their ancestral homeland. Mahmood Chairman claims he and his family were on the last plane out of what was then East Pakistan on the eve of the civil war which, in turn, transmogrified into a successful independence struggle in 1971. He was 14 at the time.

Once in England, he attended school for a few years until, in 1974, he moved to East London with his younger brother in order to learn a trade. His big break came in the 1980s when he began to work in a restaurant in Newcastle. Realising the demand for 'Indian' cuisine at the time, he decided to open a restaurant himself with the help of his two younger brothers. The success of this venture led to further successes with the opening of more restaurants. Over the next 20 years, the Chairman became rich. So rich, that he decided to return to Bangladesh in the early 2000s, in order to 'give something back'. The story of Mahmood Chairman is not an anomaly in this part of Bangladesh. Villages across the Londoni Belt—which stretches from Habiganj in the east to Beani Bazaar in the west—are inhabited by 'Londoni' politicians (mostly men) who spend their time shifting between the UK and Bangladesh.

In fact, Mansabpur's neighbouring unions were all headed by men with intimate, migratory links to the UK or the Gulf—either as migrants

themselves or through kin relations—whose electoral campaigns were substantially funded by profits generated overseas. Perhaps the most striking case in the area of foreign funds directly translating into political influence is that of the local Awami League member of parliament (MP) at the time of fieldwork. The MP, a Londoni businessman who, like Mahmood Chairman, had made his fortune through a network of successful Indian restaurants in the UK, effectively 'bought' his electoral ticket from the prime minister herself, according to my informants. It was rumoured that he gifted a luxury car and a house in London to Sheikh Rehana—the sister of the current Prime Minister, Sheikh Hasina and a UK resident—and with whom the MP had forged a close relationship while in England. Intriguingly, Sheikh Rehana's daughter, Tulip Siddiq, has been a Labour Party MP in the UK parliament since 2015 and is a close aide to her aunt, Sheikh Hasina. Although he was subsequently elected, the MP reneged on his pre-election promises on development and spent his entire tenure trying to recoup losses incurred by a flamboyant election campaign. Mainly through illicit means. Consequently, his reputation took a battering, and he was not re-elected for a second term.

Londoni politicians are generally perceived to be honest, due to their relative wealth and the presumption that they would serve rather than extort while in office. However, as we shall explore, even honest politicians, such as Mahmood Chairman, could not escape the structural entanglements of the nexus of money, corruption and crime in the murky world of Bangladeshi politics. It is thus important to note that perceptions of politicians are unstable and prone to constant public scrutiny throughout a given term in office. This section aims to elucidate how established political reputations are often challenged, and careers are seemingly terminated by the twin factors of competing rival factions, and the perpetual pressure from ordinary constituents seeking the effective delivery of development projects.

To this end, I provide an ethnographic account of a political dispute that occurred during fieldwork in an attempt to illustrate how state actors, and their affiliates, manage disputes and tether political factions, in order to effectively appropriate state resources. Through such machinations, the Londoni class in Gulapbari is able to consolidate its hegemony over landless groups by appealing to the latter's desire for 'development'. In this way, Tobias Berger's 'logic of non-enforcement' in legal disputes is upheld (this issue). Moreover, landlords are able to successfully harness

villagers' sympathies and support by appealing to established percep-
tions of what constitutes a 'good' or 'moral' leader, through the hybridi-
sation of traditional authority (Price and Ruud 2010), ocular displays of
power and wealth (Michelutti et al. 2019) and the ability to 'enforce'
through the threat of violence (Hoque and Michelutti 2018). This curi-
ously muddles the workings of the 'party–state' in my fieldwork context
('Introduction' to this issue), as allegiance to a political party is abro-
gated by patronage to Londoni landlords (regardless of the latter's parti-
san affiliations), since they possess the will for swift and direct provision
of services. In this way, Londoni households are able to maintain their
grip on local power.

At the same time, however, landless groups are not wholly oblivious
to the actual motivations of the political class. In fact, most are well
aware that local politicians are generally invested in enhancing their own
social and economic interests over and above the interests of the com-
munity at large. Despite this, there was an acceptance among poorer
groups that this was ultimately the nature of politics in Bangladesh and,
so long as development projects were visible and regular, the personal
ambitions and financial gains of politicians would be overlooked. As one
migrant labourer from the neighbouring district of Mymensingh said to
me: 'Baba, this [dispute] is a landlord's (*zamindari*) game (*khela*).
Whoever can provide me with a daily wage (*rouz*), can take my vote'.

Gulapbari is the biggest and wealthiest ward in the union. It is home
to the union's 16 landed patrilineages (*gushti*) who, combined, own the
entire *haor* (a vast area of fenland to the immediate south of the village).
Importantly, they are also all 'Londoni' lineages which is to say that at
least one household belonging to each lineage group is resident in the
UK. For the people in Gulapbari, non-domicile villagers are regarded as
bona fide members of the community (samaj), regardless of whether or
not they were born in Bangladesh, or even if they have never visited their
ancestral village. As the village elders (*murobbi*) often recounted to me:
blood (*rokto*) provides access to the soil (*zamin*). But this does not hold
true entirely anymore.

Originally, the haor was owned by five lineages. However, since the
mass migrations to the UK in the 1950s and 1960s, and the advent of the
remittance-based cash economy, smallholders and landless groups were
able to purchase land and titles at inflated prices from their overlords.
Talukdar was a hereditary title from the Mughal era, given to pioneer
migrants from the imperial interior who were granted land deeds in

exchange for deforesting the region and creating suitable conditions for rice cultivation. Over the years, however, the title of Talukdar is accorded to anyone who has purchased *talukdari* land. These newer groups and individuals are known as *Peti-Talukdar*, or 'minor' Talkudars. The distinction, however, is usually the pompous concern of the original landlords, and, for all intents and purposes, Talukdars of all ranks are widely regarded as the same. Gulapbari now has 16 Talukdar lineages and, together, they make up the local political and economic elite.

Administratively, union residents elect both the councillor (*member*) for their respective wards, and the union chairman, every 5 years. All councillors serve under the union chairman, and together they form an administrative cell, which is the lowest rung of the state in Bangladesh. Whereas councillors can often be of landless and low-caste backgrounds (depending on which ward they are representing), the union chairman is invariably a male landlord, who is based either in Gulapbari or its rival Londoni village of Fakirpur. Although councillors are elected, in reality, they wield little power. The authority of the union chairman is total, and his say in village affairs is usually final. He acts not only as both the ceremonial and political head of the union, but is also the first point of contact for state officials (i.e., the local MP, police and officials at sub-district/*upazila* level).

The chairman does not always act independently, however. He is answerable to his fellow landlords who provide him with electoral support and funds, effectively limiting the options and opportunities of the poor, and thus maintaining the traditional status quo. Although the statutory pay for such a role is relatively meagre, access to union resources and funds is routed through them. Often, village chairmen have ruined their reputations by the end of their tenure due to malpractices, though a number of ex-chairmen (*shabek-chairmen*) of all moral persuasions continue to live and be politically active in Gulapbari.

The Bangladesh Nationalist Party (BNP)-affiliated Mahmood Chairman, who we met at the beginning of this section, enjoys a stellar reputation for his honesty and service to the community (*samaj-sheba*). Despite having unfettered access to community funds, he refuses to *personall*y take a cut or 'commission'. On the contrary, he has spent hundreds of thousands of pounds of his own money for development projects in and around the union. This has made him an immensely popular figure, particularly among the poor. In fact, when a purge of corrupt

state officials was instigated by the interim military caretaker government in 2007, the chairman was alone in the surrounding areas not to be accused of embezzlement by constituents. When I asked him why he entered politics in Bangladesh, he replied that he was not interested in politics per se, but in 'development and philanthropy'. I then asked him why he thought so many villagers in the union consistently voted for Londoni candidates, to which he replied:

> I can only speak for myself here, I can't speak for my opposite number. When I came back here, I didn't do so with the intention of becoming a chairman. We found that previous chairmen had not completed development work they should have done. We didn't have electricity, a high school, and tarmac roads. We therefore felt uneasy or uncomfortable living here. So, we spent a lot of time with the leaders discussing why we lacked so much in terms of development when there are so many wealthy people in our union […] The whole affair was unintentional. We now have electricity, roads, a high school, a union complex, various bridges etc. There are still a few roads left to complete or tarmac, hopefully that will be completed in the near future.

The chairman here is echoing a concern and general desire for development that is shared by most people in the constituency. He was also dog-whistling the corruption and incompetence of his predecessors. As has been discussed at length elsewhere, 'development' (*unnoyon*) is a ubiquitous ideal not only in Mansabpur union but also throughout Bangladesh (Gardner 2012; Gardner et al. 2014; cf. Lewis 2011). Politicians who are seen to deliver it enjoy elevated status within their communities which, of course, translates into consistent electoral victories. When I asked a poor local taxi driver why he voted for the chairman despite constantly questioning his intentions, he replied that, essentially, the chairman was 'more honest than the rest', and that since he took office, roads, bridges and schools had been built in the union:

> At the end of the day, that's what matters. What have you done for development (unnoyon)? How have you benefitted the ordinary person (*aam manoush*)? Mahmood Chairman put so much of his own money into development, I saw it with my own eyes. He didn't need to do that—coming back from London to help poor people. Who does that?

People are crazy for London, but he's gone the other way! I'll always vote for him, for just that alone.

Throughout his first term in office, the 'honest chairman' embarked on an ambitious and unprecedented development project that became known as the 'Panchayat Committee' (PC). In 1997, the Awami League government had initiated a policy of re-distributing fallow (*khas*) land in rural areas to landless households as a means for providing security and empowerment to the poor, particularly women, who were prioritised as allottees. The onus was on landless households to file applications to their union chairman, who would then forward them to the sub-district level for approval. There were two obstacles, however. The first was an unwillingness on the part of local politicians in accepting applications due to conflicts of interest. Second, ignorance of the policy and inability to draft an application on the part of the applicant. These factors stood in the way of its implementation. This meant that although the policy has been passed as legislation, at the grassroots, the number of landless poor who were actually claiming khas land remained modest (cf. Gupta 2012).

In Gulapbari, much of the khas land remained unaccounted for officially. However, the PC took on the role of coordination of its administration, directed by the chairman. The PC consists of a representative (*protiniti*) of each of the landed lineages and five representatives of the landless lineages (who sardonically refer to themselves as the 'Yes Committee'). Each representative is selected by their respective lineage to debate and ratify all matters relating to development projects in the village on their behalf. The chairman included landed groups within the committee due to the fact that much of the khas land was either adjacent to or surrounded by private land, which presented the problems of access. Furthermore, some of the private land was also fallow and/or not being used, which meant that the chairman could persuade owners by appealing to their altruism (*doya*) to lend their land for development purposes. Proceeds from various projects were then distributed to poor households in need. One prominent landowner and member of the PC remarked:

Before, the fish in the ponds (*beels*) were being stolen by people from everywhere. But now, the villagers can enjoy their right (*dabi*), because we make sure all the money from the beels is spent on village projects, which benefit everyone. We bought textbooks for the

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schools; we fixed the roads and built bridges. We gave money to the madrasa. A lot of girls from poor households were able to get married and maintain their dignity and honour— [all] because of the existence of this committee. How many villages have what we have? […] The landlords weren't benefiting from the beels anyway, so why not share what you're not using?

Priority was given to the provision of dowries for unmarried women, and the welfare of widows, thereby honouring the spirit of the law, albeit on an ad hoc and first-come-first-serve basis. Politically, the chairman was able to informally protect landowners who were already appropriating khas land in their vicinity, by seeking donations for development projects in exchange. In the main, the policy appeared to be working, until three roads were built through the haor in 2013.

The official rationale behind building the roads was to facilitate the transportation of crops from the haor during the harvest season. As a development project, this was beneficial to both landed and landless groups. Elevated roads meant easier and quicker access to the haor for both human labour and heavy machinery, thus increasing productivity and decreasing the intensity of manual work. Importantly, for the landed groups, the construction of roads also meant an increase in the price of land. In theory at least, the project was a triumph for the chairman's legacy and political style: placating both the poor through the populist policies of development and the village elite through the combination of moral duty and the informal reorganisation of their benefits from encroachment. But some members of the elite benefitted more than others, calling into question the degree to which the chairman was truly 'honest'.

Three landed members of the PC were tasked with the responsibility of constructing one road each. This meant that they were in control of hiring manual labour, distributing contracts to construction firms and keeping accounts. A project secretary and cashier were also appointed for general oversight and bookkeeping over the entire project. Access to the PC fund was the exclusive domain of the cashier—another landlord. This arrangement was obviously susceptible to abuse, which is what transpired. Each member of the project committee took illicit personal payments from the fund for their managerial 'efforts', despite claiming to act in a voluntary capacity. Books were doctored to inflate costs,

effectively concealing commissions gained by the project committee. This came to light after a rival faction—aggrieved that they themselves were not selected to manage the project—called a council meeting (*shalish*) after the project was completed, accusing the PC of corruption (*durniti*). They concluded the meeting by suggesting that the only way to resolve the matter was to conduct an audit of the earth used to construct the roads, and then tallying the result with the official figures recorded by the project secretary. An audit of the roads by an independent state surveyor, recruited from the sub-district administrative headquarters (*zila parishad*), revealed that over 300 units of earth was unaccounted for, equalling a cash deficit of at least BDT 260,000 (£2,500).

When this deficit was presented to the project managers, they flatly denied any wrongdoing and claimed it was, in fact, a cynical ploy on the part of the rebel faction to discredit them for personal gain. The politically ambitious rebel faction was unmoved by these claims and went about consolidating its power, recruiting landless groups to its cause and mobilising the village's *jubo samaj* (youth community), which consisted of both landed and landless groups but, as usual, was led by the former. It organised a series of public meetings, inviting members of the project management to counter the allegations. The project management, including all members of the PC other than those aligned to the faction, boycotted these meetings and refused to acknowledge the legitimacy of the faction's findings. They claimed that the survey was not comprehensible in its methods and 'bought' by paying off a corrupt official. One landless member of the jubo samaj (whom I met at one of the earliest boycotted meetings) was unequivocal in his condemnation of the hegemony of the landlords:

> For too long have we put up with landowners doing what they like. Who do they think they are? Those zamindari days are long gone. They can't get away with it now. They can't get away with stealing the people's rights (*haq*). We will make sure of it. See how they are completely disrespectful to the rest of the village? They took the money and didn't even bother turning up to defend themselves. But this is a different age. Their time is up!

The faction arranged a final meeting where dignitaries (*matbor*) were invited from neighbouring villages to adjudicate the dispute. Members

of the PC, however, decided to boycott this meeting on the basis that the intentions of the rebels were incredulous. Despite their absence, the independent mediators determined that there was, indeed, a discrepancy in the books, and the refusal of the PC to respond to the allegations rendered them unfit for this purpose. Consequently, it was agreed that the PC should be disbanded, and provisional responsibilities were to be handed over to the management committee of the local madrasa (Islamic seminary), who were trusted and respected by all and sundry. When the PC gained knowledge of this development, they organised a counter meeting at the homestead of the project secretary—a prime suspect in the scandal. This meeting never took place. In response to the decision to disband the PC, the cashier was defiant. In a public rant at a tea stall and popular meeting area (*adda*) in the village, he bellowed:

> How can they dissolve the committee? Under whose authority? The PC was created by all the gushtis that own the haor to protect their assets. The PC is the body that manages their private assets. It can't be dissolved, except by consensus of 'the sixteen'. The panchayat has no authority on matters related to the haor. It's a private matter. It was because of the good will of the haor-owners that this central fund was set-up in the first place. We were under no legal obligation. Let's see how they dissolve the committee.

In an unprecedented move for a deeply conservative and traditional agricultural community, local youths aligned with the faction took to the streets of the village on motorbikes and armed with guns (although they were not in direct display)—imitating the contemporary riot tactics of urban student politicians (cf. Andersen 2013; Kuttig 2019; Lewis and Hossain 2019; Ruud 2010, 2014; Suykens and Islam 2013). It should be noted that this method of political activity is still restricted to towns and cities, and it is yet to fully filter into rural areas, where partisan rivalries are not as entrenched as in urban centres. This may be due to the nature of everyday village life and its entanglements with kin, local customs and etiquette. The lack of personnel in rural areas may also explain the less intense nature of partisan politics—for the time being anyway. The youths warned villagers not to attend the PC meeting. They threatened them with reprisals if anyone attended and invited them to join forces against the corruption of the PC. Boycotting the landlords, it was argued,

was in the interests of all villagers, both rich and poor, high caste and low. Poor villagers responded positively with the nascent egalitarian ideology of the faction, as the entrepreneurial interests of the landowners had historically denied them full and rightful access to khas land.

A local landless fisherman confirmed widely held suspicions in the village that the project secretary was the mastermind behind the scandal:

> I've known [the secretary] for many years, probably before you were born. He hasn't worked for over 30 years. Where does his money come from? How can he afford reserved taxis to Sylhet? New clothes? Extensions to his house? How did he pay for his daughter's wedding? Maybe some of it comes from London, but where does the rest come from? I always thought he was taking commission on village work, but I never thought he'd get caught. If someone from my family did that, they'd get publicly lashed.

Beyond the presence of permanent and seasonal landless migrant labourers from neighbouring districts, Gulapbari is also home to a number of poor indigenous fishing castes (*Machwa*/*Maimal*). Fishing caste households can be found in exclusive wards dotted across the village and in the union more widely. Numerically, they outnumber the landed groups and are a key voting bloc in elections. Prior to the haor dispute, Mahmood Chairman enjoyed overwhelming support among this community, who were instrumental in electing him on an unparalleled three occasions. They were the direct beneficiaries of the PC policy to open up the privately occupied beels for public fishing, which was conceived and orchestrated by the chairman.

The haor road project also benefited fishing groups as it meant better access to the beels in fishing season, as well as employment opportunities during the off-season, such as providing security and general maintenance of real estate located in outlying private plots. The road scandal affected previously held perceptions of the chairman being resistant to corrupting forces. Many had presumed he had successfully abated pressures from profiteering landlords to annex khas land for personal gain. As the rival faction drummed up support for their cause, particularly among poorer villagers, many leaders within the fishing community began to question the chairman's legacy and suitability for the role: 'we

always thought he was honest (*bishahi*), but it turns out he was working with them all along', remarked the aforementioned fisherman, a respected elder in the community. Fishing caste youth, however, openly declared their support with the rival faction, and many joined it. Village youth from all backgrounds engaged in a campaign of open dissent against the PC, publicly and angrily accusing them of theft and corruption in official panchayat meetings and at tea stalls at the local bazaar. In a deeply traditional community, unabashed expressions of vitriol against the local elite was not only unprecedented, but created a village-wide atmosphere of tension and latent hostility in the weeks building up to the proposed PC meeting.

Realising the potential for bloodshed, the chairman (who had only just returned from his most recent sojourn in England) decided to intervene. The night before the meeting that was scheduled at the project secretary's homestead, the chairman organised rounds of talks with leaders of both factions. The parties negotiated throughout the night, with prominent landowners in the UK also contributing via telephone and Skype. At 6 am, a deal was struck. At 8 am, two hours before the PC meeting was due to commence, the chairman climbed the madrasa minaret, took the microphone, ordinarily used for the call to prayer (*azan*) and announced the following:

> Respected people of Gulapbari, this is your Union Parishad Chairman, Mahmood Miah—As-salam wa alaikum. After much discussion, it has been agreed that the meeting scheduled today at 10 am will now not go ahead. I have taken it upon myself to re-arrange this meeting for another time. Villagers will be informed of the new date, by me personally, in the very near future. As-salam wa alaikum.

On the surface, this seemed like a wind-change in village affairs. In actuality, however, it was far from it. The two wealthiest Londoni patrons in the village, resident in the UK at the time, had shifted the power balance overnight between the factions in favour of the old guard. They had struck a deal with the breakaway faction to include them within the executive committee of the PC in exchange for a return to normalcy. The issue of the missing funds was to be forgotten, and a proposal was made to demote the incumbent project secretary, cashier and site managers. They were no longer to be involved in development projects. In their

stead, the leaders of the faction and the madrasa were appointed as over-sight officers in future projects. This resolution was ratified by the incoming Awami League–aligned union chairman from the rival village of Fakirpur, in front of the entire village (mostly men, of course).

Local power thus shifted from one group of landed and interrelated linage groups to another within the same political establishment, without the emergence of any substantial change in ideology. Supporters of the rival faction from poor backgrounds were not promoted, and the jubo samaj were told by their leaders that the struggle was over. Some months later, the much-maligned former project secretary was re-employed by the PC. He was installed by the personal decree of a Londoni landlord, who had donated substantial funds for a further development project in the village. The landlord insisted on his distant relative manging the project. The secretary continues to reserve taxis on his frequent trips to the city.

III
Decentralisation and the consolidation of Londoni hegemony

The post–1997 decentralisation drive in Bangladesh was intended to take government 'closer to the people' (Faguet 2017: 1679). Whereas the establishment of the PC is a clear indicator of the policy as it works 'from below', it does not necessarily translate into a more effective form of democratic government in local contexts. In fact, as the haor dispute has attempted to highlight, cultural, economic and historical factors at the local level often determine development outcomes in decentralised contexts. The result is regional variance and heterogeneity in the delivery and form of development projects, mirroring the 'systematic produc-tion of arbitrariness' explored in Gupta's more recent work in state development programmes in Uttar Pradesh (Gupta 2012: 6).

In the Londoni Belt, as we have seen, there is a general consensus among both rich and poor groups to engage in development objectives, such as schemes designed to redistribute khas land explored in this article. However, when juxtaposed against the concomitant factors of the con-flicting interests of landed groups, a remittance-based local economy, and the annexation of official state offices by well-meaning but ultimately compromised wealthy politicians, a more complex picture emerges. The 'state' in this part of Bangladesh is located within these 'blurred

boundaries' and is *personalised* by the elected union chairman and his delegates, who provide services to the constituents, mainly through development projects, issuing bureaucratic permits and certificates and arbitrating disputes (Berger 2017 and this issue; cf. Koch 2018).

In contrast to Mahatab, the bus workers' union leader, whose political career is explored by Kuttig in this volume, Mahmood Chairman is a politician whose authority is generated not by 'muscle power' and class solidarity, but through his status as a wealthy and honest transnational businessman within the local community. This status, in turn, produces a web of patron–client forms of exchange, which is organised, as Ruud highlights (this issue), in 'concentric circles around state actors' and based on intimate localised relations of 'trust' in service delivery. Ruud's concept of the 'mohol', therefore, is helpful in conceptualising political dynamics that exist between blocs of landed politicians in Mansabpur.

On the one hand, the PC represents a corps of landlords with common interests. On the other hand, rivalries within the mohol are frequently played out when the same interests are threatened, to the detriment of others in the community, particularly the landless poor. The result is a fragile hegemony of stakeholders, dependent on the offices of state, who scramble for its resources. Yet, the influence of transnational state actors, and the financial and social capital that such individuals command, is paramount in the delivery or non-delivery of such services. Just as Visser (this issue) calls for the collapsing of analytical boundaries between 'family', 'kinship' and 'the state', and the associated role of transnational politics in achieving this, this article makes a similar call to integrate the role of global capital and historic labour migrations in the vernacularisation of local authority in the Londoni Belt, facilitated by structural decentralisation 'from above'.

Mahmood Chairman stepped down at the end of his third term because, by his own admission, he had taken his tenure as far as he could. The pressures of placating the economic and political interests of his landed peers, together with the development demands of the poor had seemingly taken its toll. Fortunately for him, his reputation as an honest broker has remained relatively intact, probably due to his decision not to stand for re-election following the dispute. However, to what extent was his abdication following criticism of his leadership, in reality, a political wind-change in the union?

The deal struck with the rival faction merely passed power from one section of the local elite to another, lobbied by a consortium of local notable residents in the UK. The current chairman, also a member of a wealthy Londoni lineage (who served a previous term in the 1990s) still presides over the functioning PC, and development contracts continue to be farmed out to wealthy associates. The welfarist relations between Londoni households and their landless and poor clients remain unaffected by the new administration. Poor villagers also continue to periodically petition their overlords in times of need, and vote for the 'least-worst candidates' in elections, as I was often told. They voted for those who showed 'honesty' and 'generosity' (read: Londoni)—the most potent metric for electoral success in this part of Bangladesh. Perhaps the most significant difference between the two regimes is the party affiliation of the new chairman.

As a 'party-state', new opportunities for development in Bangladesh are disproportionately heightened through intimate patronage links with the ruling party. Just as Mahmood Chairman had benefited from the BNP-led government between 2001 and 2006, the incumbent chairman can now utilise networks within sub-district and district-level government institutions to push for the prioritisation of his constituents' needs above non-affiliated others. Ultimately, however, the lion's share of development funds in Mansabpur come from the private purses of non-resident overseas patrons, who demand influence in the union's affairs and the protection of assets in exchange for their 'generosity'. To what extent this dynamic remains in place with the advent of future, increasingly distant and politically apathetic, generations of Londoni, remains to be seen. Nonetheless, for the time being, Londoni households continue to hold the keys to local power in this part of Bangladesh.

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