

WORKING PAPERS OF THE
CENTER FOR RESEARCH ON SOCIAL ORGANIZATION

DEPARTMENT OF SOCIOLOGY

UNIVERSITY OF MICHIGAN

Paper #28

May, 1967

The District as an Ethnic Unit in East Pakistan

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Paper presented at the annual meeting of the Association for Asian Studies, March 22, 1967, Chicago. This report is based on data originally collected as part of the Project on Social and Cultural Aspects of Development, Center for International Affairs, Harvard University.

The District as an Ethnic Unit in East Pakistan

It is commonplace to view the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent as a mosaic of ethnic groups, differing from one another in language, in religion, in other cultural traits, and perhaps in character as well. To choose a single example that applies equally to both India and Pakistan, Bengalis and Punjabis are usually characterized in quite different ways, and few observers would argue for their cultural similarity in any but the broadest terms. This paper is not, however, concerned with the nature or the adequacy of characterization at this major regional level, but rather focuses on a more subtle differentiation--that at the level of administrative Districts--using survey interview data gathered in East Pakistan in 1964 on some 500 cultivators and urban factory workers. The cultivators come from four largely rural Districts--Barisal, Comilla, Mymensingh, and Noakhali; the industrial workers come from the three industrial cities of East Pakistan--Dacca, Chittagong, and Khulna.

Let me begin by posing the question in this form: To what extent can the 17 Districts of East Pakistan be regarded as units of ethnicity, or to use a more colorful term suggested by Clifford Geertz, as centers of primordial attachment? Once posed, it is clear that the question could easily be reduced to a discussion of the meaning of the word "ethnicity". Let me say right away that I do not pretend to offer any definitive definition.

Rather I would like to use some familiar connotations of the term to present several simple findings that seem to me to sharpen one's awareness of the importance of District differentiation, while at the same time indicating limits on its future significance. The criteria I will examine are:

1. Personal identification with one's District;
2. Perceptions of character differences by District;
3. Actual differences in culture and character by District.

There are other criteria one might like to examine. For example, I wish it were possible to trace out the historical dimension of District differentiation. Clearly District lines in many cases stretch back a very long time, and reflect ecological and political boundaries that were of greater importance at earlier points in time than they are today. My data, however, are wholly limited to the present, with some suggestions as to the future, and I will have to leave the historical dimension to be treated by others.

Let me turn now to the first piece of evidence.

Although East Pakistan is a relatively homogeneous area from a cultural standpoint--certainly more so than West Pakistan--and although an outsider might well feel that a characterization of the majority of the people living there as Bengali Muslims provides as much detail as is needed, such a characterization can hardly be adequate for East

Pakistanis themselves. . . In a rapidly growing city like Dacca, where almost everyone is an East Bengali Muslim, this level of identification is simply not useful in defining one's own self or in obtaining information about others. . . What is useful is to know a man's place of origin, especially since such a high proportion of the city dwellers are in fact people who were born and reared elsewhere in the Province. . . Such differences in origin are commonly represented by District name. . . Thus, one of the first things a man wishes to know about another man is the District to which he "belongs". . . And two strangers who discover themselves to be from the same District feel a considerable relational bond, much as occurs with nationality groups in the United States, although more strongly and more openly. . . Thus, what is primarily an administrative unit to the outside observer, albeit a highly important one, is to the people involved a powerful symbol of common or separate identity.

Our interview schedule did not include much that directly bears on this basic issue of identity, but one question does relate to it. . . We asked each respondent the following:

... If you were travelling in a foreign country and were asked what country you belong to, how would you reply? For country we used the generic word "desh", so that a man might reply with whatever name seemed to him to stand for his primary homeland. In our major sample, referred to

earlier, two thirds of the men interviewed replied to this question by naming their District. The proportion was somewhat higher among the urban factory workers than among the rural cultivators, mainly because the latter often gave their village name, but nonetheless District was the most common response in both settings. The answers "Pakistan", "East Pakistan", and "East Bengal" were altogether given by only 10% of the sample; these 10% were in most cases the more educated respondents, and indeed in a separate college student sample to which the same question was administered, the answer "Pakistan" was given by 95% of the respondents.

Perhaps needless to say, the answers just reported for the main sample do not mean that the respondents were unaware of their political citizenship or their linguistic distinctiveness. On the contrary, other information in the interviews indicates that the men were relatively sophisticated in these regards. Nor could we expect these responses to be unchanged if the men interviewed were suddenly transported outside of East Pakistan, say to Europe or America. Obviously, the frequency of the "Pakistan" responses would jump. The point here is simply that the framework provided by the Province boundaries is such as to make District lines the major internal mark of differentiation. To an ordinary man of East Pakistan, there are vague bits of information about Burma or Calcutta or possibly Karachi, but other "countries" that in a meaning-

ful sense help bound and define his identity; his own ego, are the adjacent or near-by Districts of East Pakistan, not the countries known to his educated fellow citizen.

Turning now to our second question, if a man distinguishes among other men by their District of origin, it is to be expected that he will--both as cause and as effect--perceive differences among these Districts in culture and character as well. And indeed casual conversation makes it clear that stereotypes of the Districts are widely and deeply held. I interviewed some 50 factory managers, for example, and those who showed any interest at all in the composition of their labor force usually did so in terms of District differences. Indeed, in a number of cases, it was clear that hiring policies were affected somewhat by the beliefs that the men of some Districts were more hard-working or more troublesome or more something else than others. These factory managers were often non-Bengalis, but the same popular images occur frequently in the conversations of both sophisticated and unsophisticated Bengalis.

Such beliefs are also reported in scholarly work on the Province. Thus A. F. A. Husain, in his study Human and Social Implications of Industrial Change in Pakistan, makes a number of references to beliefs about differences in District character. And the more positive aspects of these same beliefs appear in official government documents. Thus, the 1961 Census of Pakistan volume on the

District of Noakhali describes the people of that District as "highly enterprising, adventurous, and resourceful with plenty of drive and initiative and ready to work anywhere at any time for a decent wage." This may seem to be a general comment, applicable to almost everyone, but such is not the case as we will shortly see.

Our major survey did not attempt to discover the extent to which ordinary factory workers and cultivators hold particular beliefs about each District. But I did administer to a small sample of college students from four classes in Dacca an adaptation of a standard measure of ethnic stereotypes developed in the United States. The students were asked simply to draw from a printed list of 50 adjectives the four that best fit the people of each of 12 named districts. Few students had any difficulty doing this, and the main results are shown in Table 1 for the four Districts that will concern us throughout the rest of this paper.

Before looking at the table, let me note that the students themselves came from a wide range of District origins. These were too few from any one District to look at their choices of adjectives in isolation. But it was possible to distinguish the adjectives each student applied to his own District from those he applied to all Districts other than his own, and to make this Own vs. Other contrast across the entire student sample. Independent judges were asked to classify the 50 words on

the original list as basically favorable or basically unfavorable in connotation. When this classification is applied to the Own vs. Other contrast, the results are striking, although hardly unanticipated. There is an unmistakable and indeed quite strong tendency for students to apply unfavorable adjectives much more frequently to other Districts than to their own. Words such as "quarrelsome" and "money-loving" were rarely used to characterize one's own District but very frequently applied to others. What this comes down to is simply that the students show the same tendency to value positively their own group and to devalue other groups, a common finding about ethnic relations around the world. In this case the ethnic group is a District, while elsewhere it may be defined as a religious, or language, or political entity. But the basic ethnocentric propensity appears here as it does in these other and better known cases, a fact which is consistent with our emphasis on the District as an ethnic unit.

Turning to Table 1, which shows the adjectives chosen by at least a quarter of the students about Districts other than their own, we can immediately see that perceptions of Barisal, Comilla, Mymensingh, and Noakhali are by no means accounted for simply by the tendency to select unfavorable adjectives. There are several interesting types of results in the table. First, it appears that some Districts have sharper stereotypes than others--a finding for which there is no obvious explanation. Neither the nature of the sample

nor the nature of the areas makes it clear why Noakhali and Comilla, two adjacent Districts, should differ so in the clarity with which their peoples are perceived.

Second, the two Districts which are sharply perceived, are perceived in very different terms. One would hardly confuse an imagined man of Barisal--hot-tempered and aggressive--with an imagined man of Noakhali--pious, shrewd, mercenary, and industrious. Moreover, the picture of Barisal one puts together from its most chosen adjectives is an extremely simple and straightforward one. The picture of Noakhali, on the other hand, is extraordinarily complex, almost contradictory; only at a psychological level can we reconcile such adjectives as "pious" and "money-loving".

At this point our purpose is not to reconcile, however, but simply to document the fact that Districts are perceived as distinctive areas in social and personality terms, and therefore, by implication, that a man belonging to a particular District will be stereotyped in advance of any behavior he shows. Our sample is, of course, a special one in several respects. It is probable that many ordinary cultivators in East Pakistan know too little of other Districts to offer any opinion at all on them. We are registering in Table 1 the more cosmopolitan knowledge available in the Provincial capital. But the results fit well with the other qualitative sources of information referred to earlier, and I think it is reasonable to con-

sider Table 1 as a good representation of the stereotypes held about these four Districts among more knowledgeable persons, Bengali and non-Bengali.

Let us turn now to our third question. Up to this point we have looked entirely at the subjective side of ethnic differences by District. We have asked whether men identify themselves differently and how they see their own and other Districts. These subjective perceptions are not necessarily less real in effects or less important than objective differences by District, but the latter possibility raises another significant issue. Are there important differences in cultural and psychological terms among the various East Pakistan Districts--differences that occur in spite of the fact that the entire Province, with a few exceptions, is comparatively homogeneous in language, religion, and other major aspects of culture. Are the 2 million men of Barisal really braver on the average than most other Pakistanis? Is there really more piety, however defined, among Noakhali men than exists elsewhere in the Province? More generally, are there objective cultural differences among Districts that lead to, or at least support, the subjective beliefs we have documented.

The interviews with cultivators and urban factory workers mentioned earlier provide an empirical start in answering such questions. The interviews were not designed for this purpose, and in any case certain of the stereotypes discussed earlier--courage, for example--cannot be

investigated readily through this kind of structured interviewing. But the traits attributed to Noakhali men correspond closely enough to several themes in the interviews to allow for a reasonable test, and it is these we will focus on. We begin with data on rural cultivators, who represent traditional District men in the clearest sense.

Table 2 presents the findings on religious differences among samples of cultivators from the four Districts matched for education, age, and sex (all males). There are 12 questions from the interview that can be scored in terms of verbalized piety, and they fall into three sets concerned, respectively, with religious performance, religious reference groups, and religious values. Thus, we asked each man how often he said his prayers each day, how much weight he gave to the advice of religious leaders, and whether he valued more a religious or a secular education for his children. The results in Table 2 can be evaluated in several ways, but they all lead to the conclusion that Noakhali cultivators do indeed answer questions in traditionally pious ways to a greater extent than men of the 3 comparison Districts. To select an extreme example, twice as high a proportion of Noakhali men report regular prayer 5 times daily than is the case for Mymensingh. There is one interesting and puzzling exception involving fasting during Ramadan, but taken as a whole the results lead to the firm conclusion that Noakhali men are--or at least present themselves in the interview

situation as more pious than the men of the three other Districts on which we have data. In the sphere of religion, which is of course a critical area of culturally determined behavior in East Pakistan, objective differences among Districts do occur, and moreover they occur in ways that correspond to popular beliefs about the distribution of such differences.

Turning to a quite different area, a number of interview questions that can be interpreted in terms of a "mercenary" trait were assembled to construct Table 3. Simply added together, as done previously for religious items, the responses produce total scores in the direction predicted by the student adjectives, but the trend is too weak to be considered reliable. It is quite possible that the predictions based on the student stereotypes are wrong in this case, and that there are no District differences in the propensity to emphasize money. It is interesting, however, that the positive trend is actually the average result of several questions strongly in the anticipated direction, and two questions that produce a pattern diametrically opposite to the prediction. Thus, Noakhali men, as expected, are more willing than men of any other Districts to move to West Pakistan if it would mean doubling one's income. But given a choice between a manual job at Rs 200 and a clerk's job at Rs 150, the Noakhali men are more likely to pass up the short-term monetary gain for the prestige and perhaps perceived long-term benefit of the white

collar job. While there is risk in post factum interpretation, it is useful to recall that the stereotype of Noakhali men as "moneyloving" was accompanied by images of them also as hard-working and shrewd. If instead of fragmenting these terms, we put them together, we obtain a picture of a people who are not mercenary in the narrowest sense, but rather ambitious, disciplined, and oriented toward economic advancement. The Protestant capitalist of 17th century Europe, the Jewish businessman of early 20th century America, the Ibo professional and civil servant of contemporary Nigeria: these are the groups with which the Noakhali image belongs. And if we adjust our thinking to these larger terms, then the results in Table 3 make good sense on the whole. Where money or advancement are asked about as such, more Noakhali men show an interest than do the men of other Districts. But where money is opposed to something else that is an important determinant or constituent of advancement, such as a non-manual job, Noakhali men show less interest in money than do the other samples. In sum, although the results are more complex and therefore less certain in Table 3 than in the earlier table on piety, they seem also to support the student anticipation of ethnic differences at the District level.

We have now looked at three issues bearing on the title of this talk. In each instance, there is evidence that the District in East Pakistan is an important unit of ethnicity. It is a focus for personal identification. It

is also a way of anticipating, correctly or not, a man's actions in crucial areas of life. And it seems indeed to correspond with differences in culture and personality that at the nation-state level would be referred to as differences in national character. All told, within the limits of East Pakistan, District boundaries are important not only for government administration, but also for defining the cultural and social psychological structure of the Province.

I would like to turn to one final issue, which is perhaps the most important of all both theoretically and in terms of practicalities making for the future. The evidence just presented on real differences has been drawn from interviews with cultivators living in relatively stable and traditional rural areas. The major focus of the research from which these data are derived, however, is on changes that occur to men as they move out of such rural areas and occupations and into the modern urban industrial world. It is of special interest then to determine whether the differences discovered for cultivators continue to hold for the urban proletariat in Dacca, Chittagong, and Khulna, insofar as it consists of men originating from rural Districts.

This new proletariat is composed to a striking degree of migrants from three of the Districts we have been dealing with: Noakhali, Comilla, and Barisal, in order of importance. Some 75% of the migrant factory-workers come from one of these three Districts. (Mymensingh is not a

significant contributor to the urban influx, and so, like the 13 other Districts of East Pakistan, drops out of further analysis.) By looking for variation by District of origin in piety and other characteristics, we can discover whether the differences that exist among rural men continue to hold for men of the same Districts who have come to the city. For this purpose, we can draw on interviews with 280 industrial workers who were born and spent their years before age 18 in Noakhali, Comilla, or Barisal, but who then migrated to the city and at the time of interview had worked from 3 to 12 years in urban or semi-urban factories. As with the cultivator samples, the men from the three Districts are matched by education, age, sex, and other background factors, so that any differences by District of origin cannot be reduced to such demographic or related factors.

When tables are constructed for these urban workers parallel to Tables 2 and 3 for cultivators, what we find is a complete absence of even a hint of differences by District of origin. There is nothing at all to suggest that men from Noakhali are more pious than other workers, or more mercenary, or more or less of anything else. District of origin proves to be of no consequence in accounting for variation among these 280 urban respondents in a number of tables I have examined.

Placing this finding, or rather non-finding, in the context of the earlier results, we must conclude that although

District lines represent real cultural boundaries among the stable peasantry, and although they continue at present to represent loci of subjective identification for urban men, they have lost their significance as a means and mark of cultural or characterological difference among the urban masses.

... How this loss of importance comes about we can only speculate. There are two broad lines of interpretation which must be considered. On the one hand, the process may be primarily one of self-selection: the men who choose to migrate to the city may be initially different from their District peers. For example, it may be the more pious Noakhali men who remain in cultivation, and the less pious who decide to leave for the city. Such a process would account nicely for both the rural differences and the urban non-differences we find between the expressed piety of Noakhali men and the piety of men of other Districts.

On the other hand, the process may be fundamentally not one of self-selection, but rather one of mutual influence and of socialization to urban norms. Thus factory workers from Noakhali may have been originally distinctive in their piety, but once in the city and exposed to models of behavior provided by fellow workers and other urban men, as well as to the exigencies and temptations of urban and industrial life, changes in personal religious conduct and values may ensue. In this way, initial differences by District of origin would be replaced by adherence to

Province-wide standards, and a convergence takes place among all men toward trans-ethnic standards of behavior.

Our data do not allow clear choice between these two lines of explanation. Insofar as we have any evidence, both processes seem to occur to some extent, as indeed seems likely on a priori grounds. The men who migrate to the city are probably a special sample of District men to begin with, and once in the city they are changed even more. Thus the joint operation of self-selection and socialization leads to a new urban man who continues to identify with his District of origin, but no longer "represents" that District in his behavior. If this is the case, we would expect an eventual weakening of subjective identification and a dissolution of stereotypes, although such a process may be a very slow one.

Thus we may conclude that Districts as ethnic units, and indeed all other types of primordial attachment based on region, are at once powerful in their original state but extremely vulnerable to forces of modernization, particularly those such as industrialization that tend to draw men from the hinterland and turn them into cosmopolitans--citizens of the world. Regional ethnicity as such is based on contiguity and ecology, and it cannot by itself withstand the growth of inter-communication. In this sense, region as an ethnic base would seem to be brittle in a way that language and religion are not. Linguistic differences, when large, tend to keep men mentally separate even where

they are physically in the same location. Thus non-Bengalis in East Pakistan resist learning the regional language, especially its written form, and thus minimize their informational contacts with, and assimilation into, the larger Bengali culture. Religion operates in other ways to preserve itself as a differentiating ethnic force even where there is considerable contact between men of varying faiths. By defining differences in supra-natural and hence unchangeable terms and by providing for professional roles with a vested interest in the maintenance of such separation, Islam and other religions build strong barriers against mutual influence. Political states also, of course, create offices and interests that resist integration into larger units. Region alone among ethnic units lacks institutionalized ways of preserving itself as a focus for primordial attachment, and therefore it is not surprising to find that in the nearly pure form with which we have been dealing with it in this paper, it can be at once significant in traditional contexts, but lack staying power in the modernizing centers of society.

In the end, then, we must conclude that District was and continues to be a critical unit of ethnicity in East Pakistan, but that it is not destined to remain so in the future toward which that Province of 60 million people is now moving.

TABLE 1

Adjectives Applied by Pakistani Students to Four Districts

(in Percent)

Noakhali (N=85)	Comilla (N=76)	Barisal (N=81)	Mymensingh (N=69)
pious 33	intelligent 25	brave 48	aggressive 28
shrewd 31	_____	aggressive 42	_____
money- loving 28	(money- loving 16)	quarrelsome 30	(quarrelsome 20)
hard- working 28	(hard- working 13)	hot- tempered 25	(brave 17)
_____	(shrewd 10)	_____	(intelligent 11)
(brave 19)	(quarrelsome 9)	(hard- working 21)	(money- loving 11)
(intelligent 16)	(brave 8)	(money- loving 10)	(shrewd 11)
(quarrelsome 10)	(pious 6)	(intelligent 7)	(hot- tempered 9)
(aggressive 8)	(hot- tempered 5)	(pious 6)	(hard- working 6)
(hot- tempered 8)	(aggressive 4)	(shrewd 6)	(pious 4)

NOTE: Words meeting the 25% criterion for one District are shown in parentheses for other Districts to allow comparison (see text). The District base N's vary because students from a given District are excluded in calculating the percentages for adjectives attributed to their District.

TABLE 2

Religious Differences by District Among Cultivators (in Per Cent)

Measure	Noakhali (N=46)	Comilla (N=39)	Barisal (N=23)	Mymensingh (N=51)
Religious Performance				
Report five prayers daily	87	68	48	43
Report one or more prayers in congregation weekly	98	84	43	66
Report full month fasting during previous Ramadan	63	84	65	90
Religious Reference Groups				
Consult religious leaders at least once a week	39	26	26	20
Give more weight to advice of religious than government leaders	44	32	44	37
Trust information from religious leaders over 4 other sources	30	18	22	18
Interested more in religious than secular news	57	53	57	47
Religious Values				
Choose "God's help" (as against secular action) as most important for Pakistan's future	74	73	78	75
Choose religious over secular content for children's education	80	63	65	77
Say a man cannot be a good man who is not religious	78	61	61	69
Say prayer alone (not medicine) needed to cure illness	83	66	70	77
Say automobile accidents are due to God's will	95	89	90	90
Mean score on index of piety	26.6	25.2	24.2	24.8
t for difference from Noakhali	-	2.15	2.92	2.56
d.f.	-	84	67	95
p <	-	.05	.01	.02

TABLE 3

Differences in Concern for Money Among Cultivators (in Per Cent)

Item	Noakhali (N=46)	Comilla (N=38)	Barisal (N=23)	Mymensingh (N=51)
1. Disclaiming any duty to give money to a needy but distant relative	33	45	26	47
2. Naming "high pay" as most important attribute of a job	22	5	0	8
3. Wanting a radio "very much" when asked	78	55	57	67
4. Willing to move to West Pakistan for double present earnings	54	40	35	35
5. Preferring machine job at 200 rupees to clerk's job at 150 rupees	35	55	78	61
6. Mentioning material success as main benefit of education	28	29	17	24
7. Mentioning two or more items when asked what things they would like to own	30	26	13	28
8. Mentioning expensive item to own	58	50	65	42
9. Mentioning a money-making item to own	53	46	47	45
10. Claiming money most important for success	24	40	30	33
Mean score on index of money-loving	22.2	21.2	20.9	21.5
t for difference from Noakhali	-	1.13	1.35	0.75
d.f.	-	84	67	95
p	-	n.s.	n.s.	n.s.