Local-Bodies or Local Biradari System: An Analysis of the Role of Biradaries in the Local Bodies System of the Punjab

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Abstract

The local government is the drill of democracy at the lower level, and this is the source of political education. In developing countries like Pakistan these institutions work as a power show of local groups/biradaries (clans, fraternity). Here an attempt is made to present a general view of such elements which resist change in local bodies system, with appropriate examples from different districts of Punjab and biradari influence on this system. Such a study can provide a preliminary base to extend the boundaries of local government’s politics and a diminutive detail on the role of biradaries in local bodies system. Historical, analytical and comparative approach is adopted in this discourse. The study of voting behaviour has been observed under Behavioural Approach.

Contextual Analysis

According to U.N.O., local government is such an organization that is set up through proper channels. It has an authority of levying taxes and so on, and this organization in set up with the local-bodies election. De Tocqueville, French scholar, observes the local assemblies of citizens which constitute the strength of free nation. A nation may establish a system of free

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government, but without the spirit of municipal institution it cannot have the spirit of liberty.¹ Laski says, “we cannot realize the full benefit of democratic government unless we begin by the admission that all problems are not central problems, and that the results of problems; not central in their incidence, require decision at the place and by the persons, where and by whom the incidence is most deeply felt.”² It is commonly argued that ‘primordial’ group identities such as family, kinship and caste, or membership in a village faction, play a more important role in determining voting behaviour in the sub-continent, than individual political preferences.³ The offspring of one grand parent belongs to the same caste and the collection of castes is called “biradari” (literally ‘brotherhood’).⁴

**Historical Background**

Like other countries, the local government had been set up in the sub-continent by the central government. It began in sub-continent in the English era. But, this was present in the shape of *Panchayet* in the era of Vedas (1000 B.C.). *Panchayat* is an old institution in the sub-continent comprising on a body of supreme authority (elder men) of villagers, those were responsible for collection of revenues, adjudication of all disputes, and maintenance of law and order in the community. Later in the Mughal era *Panchayat* was also institution for cases concerning financial matters, religious affairs and other general cases, the *Panchayat*, would make the ruling⁵. This system is the ancient shape of democracy. The district administration has derived in character from Muslim’s Revenue Administration of India established by Sher Shah Suri (1529-45). He divided his empire

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Local Bodies or Local Biradari System

into 47 divisions or Sarkars.\(^6\) In districts there were four officials in Mughal era, namely the *Faujadar*, the *Amal Guzar*, the *Bitikchi* and the *Khazandar*.\(^7\) Districts were further divided into the *perganans* there were further officials namely the *Shikdar*, the *Munsif or Amil*, the *Fotadar*, and the *Qanungo*.\(^8\) Under the British, local system was introduced in Lahore in 1850. In 1882, the system of Lord Ripon in which he said that the councils would prove as the school of democracy, it began stronger properly.\(^9\) The local bodies system remained stronger on round basis.

After the creation of Pakistan, Ayub introduced a comprehensive scheme of local self-government popularly known as Basic Democracies. Local institutions are sub-units at the public level to which the government gives some authority so that, they may be able to solve local problems with local resources. The scheme was enforced through a detailed law known as Basic Democracies Order, 1959 with effect from 27\(^{th}\) October, 1959 in Pakistan in the shape of basic democracy.\(^10\) In the election of 1959, 1962 and 1965, the National Assembly was chosen by the members of basic democracy. The leader of District council was Deputy Commissioner at that time. In 1979, 1983, 1987 and 1991 chairman district council was head of local government. Local Bodies were not encouraged during Zulfikar Ali Bhutto’s era (1973 to 1977) The proposed elections to be held under the People’s Local Government Ordinance of 1975 promulgated by Pakistan’s first democratically elected government and which meant to elect town and municipal committees (as well as councils in the rural area), were never held.\(^11\)

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District Nazims have been working as head of district government and Naib Nazim (deputy) as speaker of district assemblies since 2001. In Pakistan, local groups in the shape of biradaries take part in local bodies’ elections and are more active than political parties. The reason is that local bodies’ elections are held on non-party basis. In 1985, general elections were held on non-party basis and the majority of the members of Provincial Assembly were from local bodies.

An Appraisal of Local Bodies in the Punjab

The dominating ideology in a society has always been an important determinant in determining the nature of the political system at national as well as at local levels. Local Bodies had been hijacked by local biradaries and Nazims linked to majority biradaries. These ties became very important during general elections and influenced the results of contests at local level. Andrew Wilder opines on local bodies and its role:

The 1985 National and Provincial Assemblies elections demonstrated that local body politics had become the entry point into provincial and national politics. According to one press account 124 of the 240 members elected to the Punjab Provincial Assembly were sitting members of local body. This had two important consequences. First, it meant that provincial and national politics began to resemble local body politics. Patronage politics became the order of the day, and representing personal and constituent interests became much more important for legislators than representing national interests. The second important consequence was that this put the PPP, which had not actively participated in local body politics, at a severe disadvantage.

The social system of the Punjab is characterized by a dominant caste system or biradarism. It impacts the political system at national as well as local levels. Zia’s policies made it stronger. One of General Zia’s most durable political legacies, and perhaps the one that has been the most harmful to the political parties, was the ‘localization of politics’. This shifted political attention away from national politics. Local identities and local issues became the substance of the Punjab politics. Political


loyalties were increasingly determined by family, faction, and biradari ties, and political power was determined by the amount of patronage at one’s disposal. A class system of ‘machine politics’ developed where politics consisted not of formulating and implementing public policies or concerning oneself with the national interest, but in assisting constituents with thana, katcheri (police station and court house) problems, introducing local community development schemes, and in doling out patronage in the form of government jobs, welfare funds, contracts, licenses, loans, and land. Zia’s strategy of diverting political energy from national to local issues had the intended effect.14

In Pakistan political parties except Muslim League (N or Q) have not been taking interest in local bodies’ election but in 2002 elections they contested in groups with different names. (Jamat Islami (Ihtsaab group), PML-N (Quaid-i-Azam group), PML-HK (Istehkam-e-Pakistan group), Pakistan Awami Tehreek (Awam group), Tehreek-Insaf (Insaf group), Millat Party (Sher Dad group) and more than 80 % local candidates male and female belonged directly to the political parties and their identity on local basis was related to their political party. This is why the government could not get success in keeping the political factors away from the local bodies. The local biradaries are the real power than the political parties. In a real sense the local biradaries have absorbed the political parties. There are different points of view about formation of local bodies. According to Andrew Heywood, a public body is staffed by appointees rather than politicians or civil servants15. Ian Mclean writes that ‘In United States, a mayor is most frequently separately elected as the political leader of a council. In smaller US cities the mayor is a figurehead and the city is run by an unelected ‘city manager’. In Britain, councilors are commonly members of a party group. The majority party’s leader became the chair of the council.16

Local groups became active and participated as a representative of political parties during general elections and local

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dominating biradaries’ groups are remarkable in those groups. In
the US, the situation is similar but National or the State
intervention is minimal and local groups are not sectional groups.
These interest groups play role in interest articulation and local
politics as well. One of the reasons behind this is the presence of
dominant interest groups which dilute the hostility between the two
parties. These groups are more active and effective than the
political parties.17 International Crisis Group comments in its
report on Musharraf’s Devolution of Power Plan and role of caste/
tribal (Biradari) in these words:

Under the Devolution of Power Plan announced in August 2000, local
governments were to be elected on a non-party basis … The reforms, far
from enhancing democracy, have strengthened military rule and may
actually raise the risks of internal conflict … Musharraf’s scheme
ostensibly aimed at establishing the foundations of genuine local
democracy. However, the main rationale for devolution was and remains
regime legitimacy and survival. Aside from the widespread allegations of
rigging and manipulation that have shadowed them, the non-partisan nature
of the local elections has exacerbated ethnic, caste and tribal divisions and
undermined the organisational coherence of political parties.18

The Provincial governments also interfered in the elections of
District Nazims. These seats of Nazims are distributed between
major biradaries on the basis of their majority in the district. In
some instances, candidate nominated/supported by provincial
government gained success with the help of major biradaries. The
District Nazims are local politicians and some times they preferred
to become district head than the members of national/provincial
assemblies.19 These are mostly current or former members of
National assembly/Provincial assembly. Candidates cannot come
out of the biradari sphere from the catalogue of candidates to the
victory. The hustle and bustle is enhanced in biradari dwellings
with the election results. A common man begins to take interest in

17 Heywood, Politics, p.130.
18 Devolution in Pakistan: Reform or Regression, International Crisis Group, Asia
Report No 77. 22 March 2004, p.i.
http://www.crisisgroup.org/home/index.cfm?id=2549&l=1; internet accessed on 29
December, 2009
19 Interview by the author during field survey. Raja Riaz Ahmed was candidate for
District Nazim in 2005. Muhammad Afzal Sahi, former Speaker, District Assembly
and Punjab Assembly and M. Ashfaq, District Nazim, Toba Tek Singh.
the counting of biradaries votes, after the commencement of the battle of vote counting. The personality or ideologies are snubbed because of relationship with biradari; and the members of every biradari gather instantaneously or somewhat latter, in the tent of their biradari’s head. Whether the candidate is of district chairman Faisalabad or Toba Tek Singh, biradari majority is shown to the common lot and the newspapers. The election alliances are made among the major and the minor biradaries. The central point of the election campaign seems biradarism. Candidates contest in groups and panel. If the candidate of District Nazim belongs to major biradari the Naib Nazim will be from second largest biradari and this tendency fluctuates district to district. Though these alliances have no ideological base but nevertheless succeed. The loss or victory in the elections is considered the loss or victory of biradari. The victory or defeat of biradari is made the topic for discussion in the government and semi-government institutions of the region; and the discussion is to be continued on the hidden realities of the election campaign for months. The defeat or victory in the election is considered the action and behaviour of biradari, instead, of action and behaviour of an individual. Some or the other biradari is claimed as the cause of defeat. In the matter of success of the alien group, instead of giving thanks to the allied biradari, to call their success as a blessing of God; to create the cause of maintaining biradari conflict and to give the concept of thanklessness is often seen.

The deep-rooted impacts of biradarism are seen in the headship of institutions, new recruitments and appointment in important offices. The greetings from biradaries and feasts in the pleasure of success become usual. Biradari ties encircled the successful candidate, so even if he wanted to get out of this circle, he cannot do so. The recruitments, promotion or transfer of local officials are counted in the positive aspect of his own biradari and in the negative aspect of the rival biradari. As though, every administrative decision is analyzed in the light of biradarism. Those elected with support of an ethnic group and a Biradari will consider employment, construct roads, streets and schools for their own group.20 The role of idle fellows is very prominent in this

20 Dawn, August 2, 2005.
They pretended to be busy and secure their interests on the basis of *biradrism* in Pakistan in general. This affects the Standard of recruitment. That is why, these impacts are seen obviously.

**Statement showing Biradari positions in last two local bodies’ elections**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Nazim 2001</th>
<th>Biradari</th>
<th>Nazim 2005</th>
<th>Biradari</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lahore</td>
<td>Amer Mehmood</td>
<td>Arain</td>
<td>Amer Mehmood</td>
<td>Arain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sheikhopura</td>
<td>Tawaqulullah Virk</td>
<td>Jat</td>
<td>Jaleel Sharaqpur</td>
<td>Arain</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qasoor</td>
<td>Rana Imtiaz</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
<td>Rana Imtiaz</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
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<tr>
<td>Okarra</td>
<td>Sajjad Haider Kirmani</td>
<td>Syed</td>
<td>Asad Ali Ghilani</td>
<td>Syed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujranwala</td>
<td>Fiaz Chattha</td>
<td>Jat</td>
<td>Fiaz Chattha</td>
<td>Jat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gujrat</td>
<td>Ch.Shafaat Husain</td>
<td>Jat</td>
<td>Ch.Shafaat Husain</td>
<td>Jat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sialkot</td>
<td>Naeem Javed</td>
<td>Arain</td>
<td>Akmal Cheema</td>
<td>Jat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mandi Bahauddin</td>
<td>Nazar M Gondal</td>
<td>Jat</td>
<td>Riaz Asghar</td>
<td>Jat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hafizabad</td>
<td>Ali Ahmed Awan</td>
<td>Awan</td>
<td>Mubashar Bhatti</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Narowal</td>
<td>Javed Safdar Kahlon</td>
<td>Jat</td>
<td>Dr.Naimatullah Javed</td>
<td>Gujjar</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rawalpindi</td>
<td>Tariq Kiani</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
<td>Raja Javed Akhlas</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attock</td>
<td>Tahir Sadiq</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
<td>Tahir Sadiq</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
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<tr>
<td>Chakwal</td>
<td>Ghulam Abbas</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
<td>Ghulam Abbas</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
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<td>Sargodha</td>
<td>Amjad Noon</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
<td>Inamul Haq</td>
<td>Sheikh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khushab</td>
<td>Ahsaanullah Tawana</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
<td>Ghulam Muhammed</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mianwali</td>
<td>Umer Hayat</td>
<td>Pathan</td>
<td>Umer Hayat</td>
<td>Pathan</td>
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<tr>
<td>Bhakkar</td>
<td>Hamid Akbar Nawani</td>
<td>Baloch</td>
<td>Hamid Akbar Nawani</td>
<td>Baloch</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Arain</td>
<td>Rana Zahid Tousif</td>
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<td>T.T. Singh</td>
<td>Ch. Ashfaq</td>
<td>Arain</td>
<td>Ch. Abdul Sattar</td>
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<td>Jhang</td>
<td>Hamid Sultan</td>
<td>Awan</td>
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<td>Awan</td>
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<td>Multan</td>
<td>Riaz Qureshi</td>
<td>Syed</td>
<td>Faisal Mukhtar</td>
<td>Sheikh</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khanewal</td>
<td>Ahmed Yar Hiraj</td>
<td>J/R</td>
<td>Ahmed Yar Hiraj</td>
<td>J/R *</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pakpattan</td>
<td>Amjad Joya</td>
<td>J/R</td>
<td>Rao Naseem Hashim</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lodharan</td>
<td>Abdulrahman Kanjo</td>
<td>J/R</td>
<td>Abdulrahman</td>
<td>J/R</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Jatt/Rajput</th>
<th>Jatt/Rajput</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sahiwal</td>
<td>Rai Hassan Nawaz</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vehari</td>
<td>Muntaz Khan Khichi</td>
<td>J/R</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahawalpur</td>
<td>Tariq Bashir Cheema</td>
<td>Jat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bahawalnagar</td>
<td>Ali Akbar Vainse</td>
<td>Jat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rahimyar Khan</td>
<td>Ahmed Mehmood</td>
<td>Syed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jhelum</td>
<td>Ch. Farrukh Altaf</td>
<td>Jat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Layyah</td>
<td>Shahadatdin Sehr</td>
<td>Rajput</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.G. Khan</td>
<td>Jamal Khan Laghari</td>
<td>Baloch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rajanpur</td>
<td>Hafeez Rahman Darashik</td>
<td>Baloch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Muzafargarrah</td>
<td>Sultan Hinjra</td>
<td>Jat</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Daily *Jang*, 16th September 2005

* J/R indicates Jatt and Rajput. These *biradaries* are found both in Jatts and Rajputs.

Table 1 is showing the strength and dominating appearance of *biradaries*. In Northern Punjab, Rajput *biradari* looks dominant. Jatts are in majority in Central Punjab and also sharing in southern Punjab. Arains are sharing in Central Punjab while Balochs are dominating in southern Punjab.

The local bodies’ elections are held primarily on *biradari* basis, so, local *biradaries* decide the candidate, then the election campaign begins and collective efforts become the cause of success. After the local bodies’ election, the real contest is for the Chairman District Council (District Nazim) and the provincial government is also indulged in it; this is why, the common man knows already who will succeed. But, occasionally, the result is taken out quite opposite. The local bodies’ institutions highlight the influences of *biradarism*. Ch. Ashfaq District Nazim (2004) Toba Tek Sing said in his interview that the impacts of *biradarism* were also present in the election of District Nazim and the pressure
of which remained on the latter matters. Muhammad Azam Chaudhary’s (1994) result, with the reference of Loshen Wolf’s book “The Life of Rippon” is that “the election of municipal administrator added fuel to fire to the racial prejudices” is true now-a-days.

During the Martial Law regimes, it was felt necessary to introduce local government institutions in the country. Local bodies schemes are introduced to rural development programme. The military intervention weakened the political system at national and at local level as well. Local bodies are regarded as the backbone of a democratic order. Zia, who was averse to elections otherwise, relied heavily on local bodies elections to introduce a new cadre of leadership throughout Pakistan and succeeded largely in this attempt.

Members of Parliament also interfere in the elections of District Nazims. They support their relatives even if it is against the policy of their political party. The ruling party supports the candidates openly but opposition is checked. Manzoor Chandio writes, “District Nazims were removed on the plea that they would use their influence in the election but the opposition alleges that government resources are being used in the election campaign by ministers, advisers and leaders of the parties in the ruling coalition.” Punjabi politics can be divided into urban and rural politics. Trend of people in cities is different from rural areas. Messon draws a picture about this trend in these words, “People in the countryside think in terms of Biradaries (tribes and clans); those in urban areas stick to sectarian and ethnic identities. There are also people who view the world divided on religious lines. The problem arises when the state fails to strike a balance and plays a role in imposing value system of the one on the other.” After the result of the contest the common member of succeeded biradari is

22 Choudhary, Local Governments, p.46.
23 Malik, Local Self Government in Pakistan, p.338.
24 Khan, Constitutional and Political History of Pakistan, p.443.
congratulated, though he was not the integral part of the election campaign, but he takes part in the role of biradari in the routine matters. Voters cast their vote to their own biradari. They involve themselves totally in election campaign and they play their role even as candidate. They contest for victory of their biradari not for individual. Tahsil Nazim Chak Jhumra (Faisalabad) Fawad Ahmad Cheema (2006) told in this context that the candidates took the help of biradari, because they wanted to succeed. He used every method for gaining success and the weapon of biradari is also used for success and on the other hand, the voters or councilors cast their votes voluntarily to their own biradari.27 Rootless democracy promoted clans politics and local bodies system made it stronger. If sectarianism and ethnocentric politics are a legacy of General Zia, the era of General Musharraf will be remembered for elections without contest.28

**Conclusion and Recommendations:**

The focal concern of this study has been the rationalization of the role of biradari in local bodies’ politics in Punjab. It is concluded that local bodies’ politics in actual fact is biradari politics and with the process of local bodies system it is playing vital role. The voting has caused grave rifts within civil society by stirring up the tribal feuds and biradarism. People are already thinking of how to push forward their families and clans in the next election. For a person to win, he better belong to a dominant ‘biradari’. Every political party had nominated candidates belonging to larger clans, is very near to the result of this study. It is human nature to exercise ethnic preference for their own group in the form of aggression against others. Some advantages are also found in the study. Biradarism assumes the status of the central character in the local bodies’ elections. It fills the gap of political parties. It is a type of contest which is essential feature of democracy. In Pakistan the biradari system provides security and power for millions of its members. It gives them an identity because biradari is not just a matter of being a Jatt or a Rajput, it is also a kinship system. The

27 Fawad Ahmad Cheema, (Tahsil Nazim Chak Jhumra, Faisalabad), Interview by author on 13th August, 2006.
28 Dawn, August 2, 2005.
system provides a wider support group than a family: a group which has a social life in which all its members participate. This tendency should be prevalent with in the boundaries of social system rather than political system. In short Ayub’s basic democracy, Zia’s rootless democracy promoted *biradarism* and by holding party-less local body elections, politics based on ethnicity and *Biradarism* has been given chance. The local body policies of the Ayub’s regime which was basic democracies, like wise Zia’s ‘rootless democracy’ and Musharraf’s ‘devolution plan’ has not been practiced with factual sagacity except the promotion of *biradarism*. Political awareness should be necessitated by the ruling regimes in the social fabric of the society.

The study has engendered multifaceted proposals to stamp out unconstructive role of *biradarism* from the social fabric of the Pakistani society. The local governments, which solve the problems of the public on the local level and their system, can be checked. The constructive role of *biradaries* can be experienced through transparent and accountable national party politics. Elections of District Nazims must be held on party basis, the District Nazim should be nominated by political parties and his candidature must be announced before the elections, so that the candidates run the election campaign in the shape of ideological group not in *biradari* base. In this way an opportunity will be given to several *biradaries* to reach at the top, and *biradarism* will be discouraged to some extent and its advantage will be for the common lot not for the particular class. The people think that the District Nazim can solve their little problems like minor job, access to the higher authorities and if the Nazim is of their own *biradari*, the task will become easy to solve, but it will be the hindrance in the way of opponent *biradari*. There is a great need to wipe out such doubts and apprehensions. Political parties must allow participating in local bodies’ elections. Chairman should be a local political leader belonging to any political party. Political participation at local level can promote grass root politics. This tendency will help to fill the political leadership gap. Thus there is a need to bridge the fissure of political leadership. The role of political parties in rural area is very crucial to promote democratic values in the country. Political education policy is required to initiate from grass root level which is lacking in the Pakistani society. The political awareness will ultimately lead to the prevalence of transparent and accountable local bodies system.