

Summary Report

National Consultation on Dalit and Socially Excluded Communities: Problems and Possible Way Forward

April 2008, Dhaka, Bangladesh

Organised by Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights and Nagorik Uddyog

Introduction

Dalits and other excluded communities in Bangladesh experience severe discrimination despite the constitution that protects citizen's equal rights regardless of their race, caste or religion. Dalits and excluded communities live in every village, city and district of Bangladesh. In general, Dalit and excluded people of Bengali nationality are mostly cobblers, sages, barbers, or washermen/women by profession. Dalits and other excluded communities have been deprived of their constitutional rights for centuries and consequently experience severe social discrimination.

Recently, different organisations have started to work at local and national level to try and reduce the levels of discrimination against Dalits and other excluded communities. Towards this aim Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR) and Nagorik Uddyog organised a joint national consultation entitled 'Dalit and Socially Excluded Communities: Problems and Possible Ways Forward' in Dhaka from 20 to 22nd April 2009. 42 representatives from different organisations working to establish the rights of Dalits and excluded communities in different parts of Bangladesh participated in this unprecedented event.

This is the first opportunity for this community to get united. Dalits will have to influence the Government on their own interests with or without assistance of others. Rights can not be attained without an organisational platform. That is why this event is historical for the Dalit rights movement in Bangladesh.

Dr. Farzana Islam, Board Member, Nagorik Uddyog

Objectives of Consultation

- To identify the problems of Dalit and excluded communities and determine recommendations for future action.
- To strengthen the organisations involved with the development of Dalits and excluded people in Dhaka and other areas of Bangladesh, increase organisational capacity and initiate a country-wide movement to implement the rights of Dalits and excluded people.
- To determine strategies to initiate a social movement at local, national, and international level to eliminate caste-based discrimination.
- To identify ways to lobby the government to recognise the rights of Dalits and excluded communities.
- To create a national platform of Dalit and excluded community people.

The Situation of Dalit and Excluded Communities in Bangladesh

Dalits and excluded women and men live in slums and villages throughout the 64 districts of Bangladesh. Dalits can be divided into two groups. One group is comprised of Bangladeshi nationals can also be known as sages, cobblers, washer man, sweepers, or through other caste/occupation names such as Dom, Paroi, Kaiputro, Kawra, Beara, Nikari, Shikari, Kapali, Hari, Poad, Kulu, Chamar, Bauri, Bagdi, Naom, Shiali, Kaybarto, Kahar, Keshra, Nalua, Dhani, Bagol, Basar, Meso, Kotal, Vogmene, Chondal, Charal, Antoj, Namashudro etc. Before they were

identified as Namashudro in the census carried out in 1891, these ethnic communities used to be known as Chamar and Chondals.

The other group consists of people originally from Andhra Pradesh and other states in India who were brought to India during the colonial period by the British to do menial jobs like sweeping, picking tea, clearing waste, dealing with dead animals etc. These people are known as Bashpuri, Dom, tea workers, Domar, Maithal, Balmiki, Fasi, sweepers, Chamar, Mala, Madiga, Chakali, Dewali etc. They are also known as Kanpuri, Telegu or Madraji based on their language and their place of origin in India.

According to government statistics, Bangladesh has a population of around 150 million of which there are 5.5 million Dalit and Excluded people, however it is thought that the real number of Dalit and excluded people is much higher.

Dalits have suffered caste based discrimination for many decades based on their profession. 'Dalit' is a Marathi word that means a person who is broken. People of this community are totally demonised by social and caste based discrimination. Another definition shows that the word 'Dalit' means communities that are not allowed to participate in mainstream society because of their profession; they are identified as untouchables or outcasts.

Some Dalit people were not satisfied with the identification as 'low caste.' Realising this dissatisfaction Gandhi attempted to solve the problem by saying, 'Dalits are the offspring of 'Hari' (A God worshipped by Hindus)'. That way, all these people from low caste would be identified as Harijan. However many Harijan converted to Christianity and were no longer agreeable to be identified as the offspring of 'Hari'. Rabindranath Tagore believed that by identifying them as Harijan there was a hidden sympathy toward that specific community which was insulting and stated that 'Durgato' (vulnerable) would have been a better word to use.

For some the word Dalit became the answer to the search for a new identity. In India, they were called the 'scheduled castes' by the Government and given reservations in education and employment. In India, a member of Dalit Community became the president, whereas in Bangladesh the Dalit community is totally ignored in all political and economical affairs.

Other excluded communities in Bangladesh object against the identity of "Dalit". However, it should be recognised that the word "Dalit" does not resemble a caste or race but is commonly used to identify communities of people that have no access to mainstream society.

We should resolve the confusion regarding the names, 'Harijan' and 'Dalit'. Harijan concept (only consist of 8 caste) is small and Dalit concept is much bigger. That's why it is more reasonable to form the common platform naming it as 'Dalit'.

Everyone should be involved in the mainstream society and activities.

Ashok Das, Mukti, Jessore

This unity will improve the speed of our work for establishing rights of Dalit and excluded which will bring a fruitful result for practical development.

Mr. Shamsul Huda, ED of ALRD

Issues facing Dalit and Excluded People in Bangladesh:

- Job discrimination
- Deprivation or exclusion from education
- Not recognised as human being with dignity
- No free access to public places

- Discrimination in right to health care
- Lack of representative organisations of Dalit and excluded people at national level.
- Not allowed to borrow loan from bank.
- Internal disputes among different Dalit and excluded community.
- The threat of drug addiction among the Dalit and excluded community.
- Unemployed educated people in Dalit and excluded communities resulting in a general aversion to education by the young generation of Dalit and excluded people
- No fruitful initiative from the government for the development of Dalit and excluded community.
- Lack of adequate information about Dalit and Excluded communities in government and non-government organizations.
- Marking the Dalit and Excluded community as the lowest caste of people in the society, and they always face humiliation by the other mainstreaming people

Most people of the excluded community are not aware of their rights.

Uttam Kumar Bhakto, Harijon Oikko Parishod, Barisal

Situation of Women:

Dalit and other Excluded communities are victims of constant discrimination and deprivation. But the women of these communities suffer the most.

Women have always suffered discrimination in male dominated society. These women of Dalit communities suffer the most in this male dominated society. These women are suffering discrimination in three ways: firstly, being a woman, secondly, being a Dalit and Excluded, and thirdly, being a poor.

Moni Rani Das, Co-ordinator of Dalit Women's Forum

The Dalit Women Forum was formed in 2006 with the assistance of BDHR and Nagorik Uddyog to establish and preserve the social dignity and providing support to make women financially independent. The following are their recommendations to improve the situation of Dalit and excluded community women face in their daily lives:

- To raise awareness about different issues among Dalit women.
- To create equal opportunities for Dalit women in the sectors of education, health and permanent housing.
- To arrange trainings and workshops in order to improve the working skills and employment opportunities of Dalit women.
- To carry out research on Dalit women and train Dalit women about their rights
- To create a quota system in the government and private educational institutions to facilitate Dalit women's education.
- To work towards creating national policies in favour of the women of Dalit and excluded communities.
- To develop Dalit Women Forum as a stronger organisation in establishing rights of Dalit women.

Nature of Discrimination

| Classification of discrimination | Nature of Discrimination | |
|----------------------------------|---|--|
| Economic | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Poverty - Lack of ownership of land - Unequal wages for labour - Exploitative and abusive working conditions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Labour based on contract (crop land and other profession) - Unemployment - Cheap/forced labour |

| | | |
|---|--|--|
| Social | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discrimination in education (e.g. admission) - Housing - Deprivation from Health care | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Sanitation - Deprivation from basic rights |
| Social, Religious And Cultural discrimination | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Untouchability - Male domination (Patriarchy) - Violation of Religious right (expelled from one's religious faith) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Linguistic problem (many do not know Bengali language) - Internal wedding custom - Prejudice |
| Political issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No participation in institutional and political decision making. - Insecurity | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Absence of women representative in governmental and institutional sector. |
| Legal issues | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of facilities in getting legal support | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lack of legal measures of punishment for violating rights. |
| Violation and torture against women | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Domestic violence - Rape - Political oppression - Highly patriarchal control | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Disrespect - Lack of sensitivity and sympathy on violence against women |

Those who earn their livelihood with physical hard labour are called 'low cast' while others who enjoy the fruit of their labour are called 'higher caste' – I propose that we should use the right explanation from our religion as a weapon against such discrimination. I think all the community people should have to be identified by the same name. Whatever the name is or not, the main purpose of the movement would be to involve the Dalit and excluded community with the mainstream society.

Krishnolal Das, Chairman, Harijon Oikko Parishod

Recommendations

The participants identified the following steps that could be taken in order to move forward:

1. Social negligence and discrimination should be regarded as punishable acts and laws should be enacted and enforced accordingly by the government.
2. Ensuring health awareness and health care for Dalits and excluded communities. Encouraging them to live a healthy life. Facilitating safe drinking water, sanitation, gas and electricity in every slums/ living place in every city/town.
3. Taking steps to ensure formal and informal education facilities for Dalits and other excluded communities. Bring in small scale industrial projects to increase their income. Ensuring quotas for them in all stages of education.
4. Ensuring the improvement of habitation and facilities of being citizens of the Dalit and excluded communities. Ensuring rehabilitation of the landless Dalit and excluded community in the government owned land (khas land) in cities and villages.
5. Setting up a commission at the national level on behalf of the Dalit and excluded communities. This commission will work to initiate policies in favour of Dalits and excluded community.
6. Implementation and maintaining of 'International Covenants on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD).
7. Reserve a seat in the National Assembly for a representative of Dalits and excluded community and establishing quotas in local government.

8. Facilitating quotas in job sector (in accordance with their education and skills as they have been fallen behind in getting the mainstreaming jobs).
9. Improving human rights situation, especially women's rights, human rights and dignity against the existing castism, prejudice and other similar existing misconception in the society. Carrying out community based counselling and human rights educational workshop especially on women's rights, and creating a public opinion in favour of marriage between men and women from different casts or races and to carry out legal and social movement to protect the dignity of the married persons.
10. Carrying out publicity against the fallacy of "Untouchability", taking steps to bring Dalits and excluded people close to the mainstreaming people of the society.
11. Bringing up the issue of overall situation of Dalits and excluded community at policy making level and pursue the policy makers to take steps for the development of the community, bringing up the issues of Dalits and excluded community to national level, pursue the government to create a cell in the ministry of women and children affairs as well as same in the local government for the development of Dalit women.
12. Creating awareness among Dalits and excluded communities toward building organization. Trying to bring the existing organisations closer and to make them more active; prioritise the organizational responsibility above all forms of cast and racial discrimination.
13. Making the local governments in different cities around the country aware and encouraged to take steps to improve the situation of Dalits and excluded communities. Creating opportunities for the people of Dalits and excluded communities to be elected in local government in the areas where a significant number of Dalits and excluded people live.

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Consultation Resolution

1. 'Untouchability and social discrimination should be recognised as a punishable crime by the government.
2. Full implementation of the "International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination - CERD".
3. The creation of a Commission for the Dalits and socially excluded people at the national level committed to make policies in favour of Dalits and excluded people.
4. Take steps for the expansion of housing and other citizens' rights and opportunities to the Dalit and excluded community people, as well rehabilitate landless Dalit and socially excluded people in government owned land (khas land).
5. Implement initiatives for formal and informal education for Dalit and other excluded communities as well as arrange small scale industrial projects for income generating activities.
6. Implement initiatives for mainstreaming Dalits within health education, health care programmes as well as raising awareness on living healthy life, and guarantee supply of safe drinking water, sanitation, gas and electricity facilities in every Dalit colony.