

## Summary - First National Human Rights Conference of Dalits and Socially Excluded Communities in Bangladesh, Dhaka, January 2009

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Caste discrimination is one of the most serious human rights issues in the world today, affecting more than 260 million women and men worldwide. The majority are Dalits (or outcasts) living in South Asia. The caste system is a strict hierarchical social system based on underlying notions of purity and pollution. Those at the bottom of the system face discrimination across all spheres of life. There are an estimated 3.5 to 5.5 million Dalits in Bangladesh (or about 2.5 to 4% of the population). Caste discrimination is not only a serious violation of human rights but also a major obstacle to achieving the Millennium Development Goals.



The majority of Dalits in Bangladesh are landless and live in chronic poverty in rural areas or urban slums. They are deprived of, or actively excluded from schools, hospitals, adequate housing, employment and participation in public and political life. Dalits even encounter discrimination when trying to bury family members in public graveyards. Approximately 96% of Dalits in Bangladesh are illiterate. Dalit communities experience daily insecurity and violence from the public, police and officials, with usually no recourse to justice. Dalit women face the heaviest burden of both gender and caste-based discrimination and violence from both men in wider society, and from men within their own communities.

From 16<sup>th</sup>-17<sup>th</sup> January 2009, the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement and Nagorik Uddyog organised the first National Human Rights Conference of Dalits and Socially Excluded Communities in Dhaka. The Conference was supported by One World Action.

Dalits have been overlooked in the development and rights discourse in Bangladesh and have only recently been able to raise their voices and mobilise for their rights. They have started to engage with the government and international donors, and to place the issue of caste discrimination in Bangladesh on the national and international agenda. This conference was an important part of this wider movement.

The aim of the conference was to provide a national platform for Dalits and Dalit organisations across Bangladesh to come together for two days of workshops, exchanges and strategy sessions. It focussed on promoting, protecting and campaigning for Dalit rights and aimed to raise awareness and gain commitment for action from policy makers, practitioners and the media. For many of the 254 participants, it was their first opportunity to meet with Dalits from other parts of Bangladesh.

Cultural and music sessions were also held by different Dalit communities and a play called 'We are Dalit' depicted various forms of discrimination against Dalits.

Dr. Hamida Hossain, a prominent human rights activist, inaugurated a photographic exhibition on life in a Dalit colony in Dhaka. Selina Hossen (novelist and advisor to BDERM) opened the conference by saying - *This conference will bring unity and success to the lives of excluded and Dalit people in Bangladesh.*



Mr. Milon Das, General Secretary of BDERM, presented a paper on the political empowerment of Dalits. He focused on the need to remove superstition from society through development and political empowerment, through firstly changing attitudes within political parties and ensuring that development and empowerment of Dalits becomes a national issue. He noted that after a six month campaign, the major political parties of Bangladesh have all committed to ensuring Dalit rights in their election manifestos.

The conference particularly focussed on the existing legal rights of Dalits and excluded communities, experiences of women Dalits and different forms of untouchability and discrimination.

Asadul Haque presented a paper on 'Socio-economic barriers of Dalits: examining the condition of Rajshahi City,' which outlined the deprivation and discrimination of Dalits in Rajshahi City particularly in terms of housing, healthcare and education.

*Dalits are an indivisible part of Bangladesh. But they do not have any representatives in national policymaking. The social leaders and the rulers always oppress them. Publicity and awareness building is not enough. Parliament has to pass necessary acts on these issues.*

Ali Niyamat, BRAC Social Worker

*All Dalits are considered as untouchable. They are excluded in society due to religious creeds. Legal acts are not enough for change. The citizens of other communities have to understand the matter by heart. It is clear that the problem lies in the society itself. This should be changed.* Monilal Das

Mr B. Solomon, General Secretary of BDERM said during the closing ceremony, that 'Now we have to be united in a platform and move forward for freedom until we achieve it.'



The Conference received widespread local and national coverage on radio, TV and in newspapers.

**The Conference culminated in a declaration in which participants called for**

**The Bangladesh Government and local authorities to:**

- Adhere to articles 28 (1) and 28 (3) of the constitution
  - o 28(1) The State shall not discriminate against any citizen on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.
  - o 28(3) No citizen shall, on grounds only of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth be subjected to any disability, liability, restriction or condition with regard to access to any place of public entertainment or resort, or admission to any educational institutions.
- Take legal action in accordance with the law against all kind of attacks, harassment and illegal attitudes towards Dalits and other excluded peoples.
- Strictly invoke the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination and other international human rights declarations to which Bangladesh is a signatory.
- Prioritise the allocation of government-owned land to landless Dalits.

- Provide Dalits with Government scholarships and free admission to schools.
- Immediately implement a national minimum wage scheme for Dalits and other excluded people.
- Take immediate initiatives to ensure basic health services in Dalit colonies.
- Develop policies and programmes to improve the marginalised position of Dalit women in society and family, in education, marriage and family and political decision-making processes.
- For the Cultural Department and national media to safeguard and positively represent Dalit cultural heritage.



For The Awami League to implement the promises made in their electoral manifesto in respect to Dalits and other excluded people.

#### **For Political Parties to:**

- Include eligible persons from Dalit and socially excluded communities at all levels in party committees and nominate them for local and national elections.
- Focus on the poverty and development of Dalits and excluded people.

#### **For NGOs to:**

- Promote socio-economic activities to alleviate the poverty and inequality that Dalit communities face. To prioritise Dalits as the poorest of the poor.

#### **For Dalit communities to:**

- Congratulate Dalits involved in uniting their communities within a common platform against discrimination and injustice.
- Free themselves from internal racial divides - If we are divided we cannot be successful in our fight against the caste system, poverty and exclusion in broader society.
- To positively consider women's rights to assets.
- To promote new initiatives to strengthen Dalit societies and to strengthen the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement. *There is no alternative to being united to obtain economic independence and achieve honourable positions for Dalits at every political level.*

*We should not be silent when we have a chance to speak. Silence is one type of treachery. Among us, those who can understand the situation of Dalits should not be silent anymore.* Azid Abul Kalam

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For more information please contact:  
 Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights  
<http://www.nuhr.org/BDHR.html>

International Dalit Solidarity Network  
[www.idsn.org](http://www.idsn.org)

One World Action  
[www.oneworldaction.org](http://www.oneworldaction.org)