



Rights of the Socially Excluded Dalits Community in Bangladesh

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ABSTRACT

The development and human rights issues of Dalits are receiving attention both national and international level. The government of Bangladesh also accepted the issue as human rights and development concerns. The article is a short mapping of the situation of Dalits in Bangladesh. The word 'Dalits' literally means broken or oppressed. Dalits is the name 'untouchables' (people who are discriminated based on caste or work and descent). Dalits Community is not a caste or a group of castes, but a group of people traditionally regarded as untouchable and marginalized to the extreme by partly religious sanctions and partly by social and economic deprivations. They face discrimination at all levels of social interaction such as from hotels to barbershops, from temples to mosques and schools. Socially their standing is negligible. They are not involved in social dynamics and are often used by influential people to pursue their unholy aims. A large number of Dalits living in the municipal areas are employed in the public and private sectors as sweepers and cleaners with very low salary. As an excluded community, they continue to work in some of the most menial and low paid dangerous jobs in the country. They are usually very poor leading a hand to mouth kind of existence. Dalits those who live in the rural areas are landless and survive in a house built with straw and mud, often on common land, under constant threat of eviction.

Keywords: Human rights, Dalits, Community, Development, Marginalized, Socially excluded, Economic deprivation

Introduction

The Dalits literally means a group of deprived people. It encompasses a broader range of underprivileged communities. Dalits are socially, economically, culturally and politically deprived and forced to work under abominable conditions at the lowest return of their labour. Dalits are the manual scavengers, the removers of human waste and dead animals, leather workers, street sweepers and cobblers. Dalits endure segregation in housing, schools and access to public services. They are denied access to land, forced to work in degrading conditions and are routinely abused by the police and upper-caste members. Dalits suffer discrimination in education, health care, housing, property, freedom of religion, free choice of employment and equal treatment before the law. They suffer routine violations of their right to life and security of person through state-sponsored or sanctioned acts of violence, including torture.



Pic-1: A group of senior Dalits citizen in Jashore

Dalits suffer caste-motivated killings, rapes and other abuses on a daily basis. Dalits women face additional discrimination and abuse, including sexual abuse by the ruler and upper caste men, forced prostitution and discrimination in employment and wages. Dalits children face

continuous hurdles in education. They are made to sit in the back of classrooms and endure verbal and physical harassment from teachers and other students. The effect of such abuses is confirmed by the low literacy and high drop-out rates for Dalits. The elderly people of the Dalits community have no social security, health and insurance facilities. They lead very measurable life. About 6.5 millions of Dalits live in Bangladesh. Work wise, they include: Rishi (shoe maker, leather worker, bamboos, cleaning gutters, sweeper), Malakar (Garland maker), Kumar (Potter), Kai Putro (fishers) Kolu, Kol, Kahar, Khourokar, Nikari or trader, Bauli, Bhagobania, Manata, Malo (Fishermen), Mowal (Honey collector), Mahato, Rabidas, Rajbongshi, Roy, Sannasi, Hazra etc.

Since the Empire of BallalSen (King of Gour during middle of 12th century AD), differences was generated in Bengal's society and originate like-Brahmin, Khatrion, Baishya, Sudra. Dalits is a specific untouchable group of people traditionally regarded as marginalized to the extreme by partly religious sanctions and partly by social and economic deprivations (Pal, 2011). This term indicates one who is related to leather, especially a cobbler, in our area the word identifies a particular group, not necessarily-or no longer-connected with leather work. The Rishi (Bengali Chamar) come Bangladesh from West (Zene, 2002) Bengal, India. Usually, the Rishi are the lower caste Untouchability (A member of the excluded group) community of Dalits. They are mainly live in Bagerhat, Khulna, Satkhira, Jashore, Manikgonj districts within a few clusters. The present day when people of the country enjoy classical life, the people of these Dalits have remained socially, mentally, economically, politically and culturally backward. They are treated as 'out castes' or 'untouchables' even by the Muslims, although caste is not recognized in Islam. For example, in certain areas the Namashudra, Rishi, Kawra, Munda are not allowed to drink tea in the restaurants, or are given separate cups; barbers do not let them enter their shops, do not invite them to join social and religious programs etc.

Saha and Paul (2009) explain that the Dalits community is neglected in society because of low education rate, extreme poverty and mental barriers. As they are socially, culturally and professionally neglected for a long time, the people of this community remain in lower



Pic-2: Celebration of the International Day for elimination of Social Discrimination 2019

economic condition for decades. On the other hand, Pal (2011) suggested that to improve socio-economic, cultural and daily life they must change their perception that education is only for rich people. The Dalits community women face three (gender, caste and class) oppression in her society (Kamen, 2004). Eisenberger and Cameron (1996) said that Rishi was not married to the other caste people. It was maintained very strictly among the community. Porag and Acherjee (2013) conducted a study on 50 cobblers in Dhaka city and found that they live in unhealthy and dirty conditions or in poor slums with the lack of water and sanitation and other human facilities.

Key challenges to the full enjoyment of fundamental human rights for Dalits in Bangladesh include lack of access to education, extreme poverty issues, health and housing problems, and unequal access to work and employment. The Dalits are usually very poor, leading a hand to mouth kind of existence. Most of them in rural areas are landless and live in houses built with straw and mud, often on common land, under constant threat of eviction. They are not

allowed to rent or build houses outside their designated localities. The worst affected are the Dalits women who suffer from multiple forms of discrimination. They are yet to be empowered to take an active part in the socio-cultural, economic and political arena in the community and the country. Discrimination against Dalits women and children should be prevented and measures should be taken to empower them through government non-government initiatives i.e. capacity building, involving income generating activities, awareness building, advocacy, lobbying, observance of national international days, community participation and establishing human rights in the society.

A Short Overview of Dalits Community in Bangladesh

Dalits Community is a group of people those who are mostly deprived by the society and country. Here we introduce most common ten (10) Dalits community in Bangladesh:

1. Namashudra: The largest Dalits community in Bangladesh. Previously they were identified as Chandala or Charal. It is believed that they were the first settlers in south-west coastal region of Bangladesh. In 1911 Census they were named Namashudra. Guru Chad Thakur and Hori Chad Thakur, religious leaders and social reformists are from this community and they preached Motua religion. Most of the Namashudra live in the greater Faridpur, Jashore, Barisal, Dhaka and Khulna region. It is assumed that at present 60% of total Hindus in Bangladesh belong to this community. Generally, they live on cultivation, day labour, fishing, fish cultivation.

2. Rishi: One of the largest Dalits communities in Bangladesh. They are the mostly depressed community those who are socially, economically and culturally deprived and neglected in Bangladeshi society. At present about 20% of total Hindus in Bangladesh belong to this community. Mainly they are shoemakers, leather worker and cobblers. They also make handicrafts by using bamboo and cane. Mostly the Rishis live in Jashore, Satkhira, Bagerhat, Joypurhat, Nilphamari, Noagaon, Mankiganj and other part of the country.

3. Rabidas: Known as Ruhidas or Muchi, Chamar and Charmakar like Rishi. They were brought to this region from Darbhanga, Muzzaffarpur, Baliachapra, Kaunoj, Patna, Munger, Bhajonpur, Kasi etc of British India. Though they live across the country (Approximately 100,000) but a large number live in Niamatupur of Naogaon. They speak in Nagri language. Their profession is to work with leather (shoe making, polish, repairing etc.) and skinning dead cow – same as the Rishi community. Now, many Rabidas are engaged in agriculture. Believe in Sanatan Hinduism but some of them converted into Christianity. They face high degree of untouchability.

4. Kawra: Known as Kaiputra. Traditionally they are nomad pig raisers. Found mainly in Jashore, Gopalganj, Khulna, Gazipur, Meherpur, Lalmonirhat and Dinajpur. Approximately 100,000 populations face high degree of untouchability. They believe in Sanatan Hinduism.

5. Munda: Known as Buno. They were brought to this region from Ranchi of India around 200 years ago. Believe in Hindu religion though they have their own god and goddess. They speak in Nagri language, live mainly in Satkhira and Khulna districts. Around 15-20 thousand people belong to this community. Their main professions were hunting and cultivation. Now they are day labours and 93.23 and 7.16 per cent are landless and literacy rate respectively.

6. Bede: Approximately 500,000 people belong to this community. They are gypsies. Majority of them are living in Munshigonj, Savar in Dhaka and Sunamgonj. A large number of them live in river boat and roam around major river basins all year round. They catch fish, snake, perform snake charming, sell traditional medicine etc.

7. Bawali: They collect woods and leaves from the Sundarbans, also work in agriculture and shrimp farms as labourers. Most of them live in 15 Upazilas adjacent to the Sundarbans. About 150,000 people belong to this community.

8. Mowali: They collect honey from the Sundarbans. They also collect wood and leaves in different seasons. They live in Bagerhat, Satkhira, Khulna, Pirojpur districts. They were brought to this region by local Zaminders for cultivation. This community usually lives in a secluded place. They show respect to Bonobibi and Pirgazi, two mythical characters. Approximately 120,000 people belong to this community.

9. Jele: Also known as Malo, Kaiborti, Rajbongshi or teor, porobasi. They belong both to Muslim and Hindu community. They live especially in major river basins and coastal areas; many are seeking work elsewhere due to environmental pressures.

10. Bajander: They play local musical instruments like Dhol, Dhak, Khol, Sanai, Kashi, Bansi etc. in various religious and social occasions. Due to changing social scenario, most of them are now day laborers or run small businesses or cultivation. They are considered owner caste.

N. B. The list is prepared on the basis of discrimination based on work and decent, so other Dalits community may be included.

International and Constitutional Obligations

Article 1 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) defines racial discrimination as, “Any distinction, exclusion, restriction or preference based on race, color, descent, national or ethnic origin which has the purpose or effect of nullifying or impairing the recognition, enjoyment or exercise on an equal footing, of human rights and fundamental freedoms in the political, economic, social, cultural or any other field of public life.” Article 28(3) of the Constitution of Bangladesh guarantees that: “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 institution.” Further, under Article 28(4) the State is obliged to “make special provision in favor of women and children or for the advancement of any backward section of citizens.”

State Policies for the socially excluded community

Bangladesh has not taken any pro-active steps to correct the discrimination and deprivation faced by Dalits and socially excluded communities. The Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper (PRSP) has not discussed poverty as a consequence of social exclusion. The PRSP has identified only a few communities, such as Bawalis (who live in the Sundarban forests), Mawalis (honey collectors in Sundarbans), Bedeys (river gypsies), Methorssweepers, sewerage cleaners and scavengers, Mymal (fisherfolk on large water bodies), Rishi (leather workers), Nagarchi (traditional folk singers), Koolies (tea garden workers). Many of other caste and communities i.e. Munda, Bagdi, Dom, Kawras and Horijons are still excluded from the state policies. The government policies, such as the national housing policy, water policy and education policy, do not categorically forbid practices of ‘untouchability’ and caste discrimination. On the other hand, certain policies are framed through a universalist perspective or provisioning for all communities, such as the National Food Policy and National Water Policy. No emphasis is thus placed on socially excluded communities such as Rishis, nor in setting a norm of non-discrimination in place when dealing with access to these basic amenities. The other policies like the National Housing Policy obligate the

government to ensure essential, emergency and limited rehabilitation/housing among 'ultra poor', 'uprooted' people and to ensure pure drinking water, sanitation of slum dwellers and ultra-poor people. Within this broad targeted policy, no mention is made about the excluded group of Rishi, Munda and others.

Dalits Women in Bangladesh



Pic-3: A Rishi community in Satkhira

About 6.5 million Dalits are residing in Bangladesh. The Hindu community only represents 9% or 12 million of the country's 160 million people, but practice of discrimination based on work and descent is common here. In Bangladesh two widespread problems are bonded labour and child labour. Dalits children in particular are vulnerable targets. Prostitution and trafficking of bonded labour also affect the Dalits girls and women, who rank the highest in levels of illiteracy and lack of education. Discrimination against Dalits

women is also reinforced by traditional norms and customs in Hinduism that deprive the women of control of property and over their own body as and exclude them from participation in politics, community development and employment. The scenario for women in a traditional, illiterate and patriarchal society is characterized by restrictions and for Dalits women it is even more pronounced. They are much disempowered to actively take part the socio-cultural, economic and political activities in the country. Dalits women in Bangladesh face discrimination, exclusion and violence as a result of both their caste and gender. The majority of Dalits girls drop out of school and miss one of the most crucial opportunities in escaping poverty. Given the vast numbers of Dalits women and men living in poverty, justice will not be achieved if Dalits continue to be excluded, and their human rights denied. The status of Dalits women is dictated by the socio-cultural, economic and political situation of Dalits people in Bangladesh today and the extreme levels of exclusion and marginality they experience. A study undertaken in 2011 explored Dalits women's participation in the political sphere at national level as well as at local and community level. The study found that Dalits women in Bangladesh lack political representation and are subject to continuous and systematic deprivation, exclusion and neglect.

Access to Social, Legal and Economic Rights

Social discrimination leads to deprivation from opportunities for development and access to public services. The Dalits community has complained that their health suffers due to poor sanitation, they have no sanitary facilities, they use arsenic contaminated ground water, they lack trained nurses for reproductive rights and health, and lack of access to medical care even in public hospitals. Many people do not feel free to exercise their right to vote, since they are either intimidated from going to the polling centers, or are forced to vote for a locally influential person. They generally do not get equal treatment and legal protection when a crime is committed against them, as most cases are



Pic-4 Caritas Bangladesh is addressing Rishi-Dalits of Satkhira with support of Caritas

settled or negotiated through informal authorities often arbitrarily or on a discriminatory basis. The Rishi women and youths are unemployed due to lack of knowledge, scarcity of fund and initial government support.



Pic-5 Caritas Bangladesh is addressing Rishi-Dalits of Satkhira with support of Caritas France.

Many Horijon people said they are frustrated to run their family, maintaining their basic needs i.e. food, education, health, accommodation, clothes. Their children are afraid to go to school, as they felt isolated and humiliated by both teachers and students. The Dalits and Rishi are segregated in colonies and unhygienic slum areas and are often systematically excluded from access to water and sanitation. While members of the Bangladeshi capital's non-Dalits population mostly boil or filter their water, dominated Dalits often have to do

with unsafe water sources. The social, legal and economic rights of the Dalits community are totally unaddressed among the broader society.

Right to an adequate standard of living:

Dalits in Bangladesh usually do some of the most menial, low paid dangerous jobs such as cleaning toilets, sweeping streets, and emptying septic tanks. A study report from 2014 shows that in total 43% of Dalits are make their living from sweeping and cleaning jobs. 22% of them work in agriculture sector and 14% of Dalits' livelihoods depend on the tea gardens. The study also found that a monthly income of 42% of Dalits families ranges between 3 and 6 thousand taka, 18% live on less than 3 thousand taka, 17% live on 6-9 thousand taka and 12% of Dalits families earn between 9-12 thousand taka. Only 11% Dalits households are able to earn more than 12 thousand taka a month. (Source: Parvez, Altaf and Mazharul Islam 2014), Bangladesh Dalits Somaj: Boishommyo, Bonchona O Osprishshota (Dalits Communities in Bangladesh: Situation of Discrimination, Exclusion and Untouchability).

Right to water and sanitation:

Dalits in Bangladesh face severe water and sanitation crisis in urban and rural areas. Urban Dalits colonies usually are situated around unclean locations, on the periphery of cities, with overflowing or choked drains, open sewers, lack of latrines and bathrooms, and near garbage dumping sites. Urban Dalits depend largely on water reservoirs to access water, which are not cleaned regularly, thereby making water unsafe for direct consumption and causing vector borne diseases. In rural areas, water crisis is acute due to the lack of water sources but also because Dalits are often prohibited from using common water sources. Tube wells often are situated in a non-Dalits locality and as Dalits do not hold land titles for their houses, often they are considered ineligible for an allotment of sanitary latrines by the government. The lack of developmental assets coupled with the consistent threat of eviction by the government or unauthorized dwellings, makes it an unviable option for Dalits to invest in sanitary latrines. Thus, the perceived notions of caste hierarchy have resulted in Dalits' inability to rent or buy their land from other communities to construct houses or sanitary latrines. In the 2015 study, conducted by BDERM and Nagorik Uddyog, found that 89% of rural Dalits use shared (common) latrines and 43% of their toilets are hanging latrines. 90% of the respondents used latrines without a roof or had a broken roof, which restricted their use during the rainy seasons. The absence of electricity in the latrines raises safety concerns for Dalits women in using the latrines in the night. The latrines constructed of tin shed and plastic besides cause serious privacy issues for girls and women, which are also unhygienic and pose various health hazards.

Right to Health

Dalits face discrimination in accessing medical amenities in public, private and even NGO facilitated centers. The study undertaken in 2014 shows that 21% of Dalits face discrimination in getting medication from hospitals. 15% of the respondents said that doctors and dispensaries did not provide them an adequate treatment or medicine due to their caste and professional identity. 26% said that a doctor or a midwife refused to visit a patient in their house. (Parvez, Altaf and Mazharul Islam, 2014, Bangladesher Dalits Somaj). Currently there is no official recognition that specific groups, like Dalits, are particularly vulnerable to ill health, and therefore deserve special protection and access to health entitlements. Health surveys and research programmes on the national public health situation do not pay particular attention to child and maternal health conditions in the colonies and settlements where Dalits communities live. Due to the lack of attention to the specific health needs of Dalits, the issues that they face in accessing affordable health care remain unreported and unattended too.

Right to Education

Dalits children study in a hostile environment facing abusive words, teasing and taunting on the basis of their caste identity. It has a significant impact on the impressionable minds of Dalits children, leading to dropouts from the primary level of education. The study undertaken in 2014 found that around 26% of the respondents face obstacles in getting admission in the non-community schools due to their family and caste identity. In many cases Dalits children have to hide their identity to get admission to schools. The study found that 30% of Dalits students experienced abuse or hatred from their classmates and others, including teachers. Moreover, 6.5% of the respondents said they still had to sit on separate benches in school (Parvez, Altaf and Mazharul Islam, 2014, Bangladesher Dalits Somaj).

Social Classification

Traditionally Dalits community is the low status community. In previous times like their grandfather's time, they were humiliated by the other caste of the society. An example was that, at the time of marriage ceremony the people of this community could attend but they remain out of the house. They could not take food with site of the other community people at the same time and place. But now the situation is changing positively through the intervention of Social Service Organization and Social Movement. Dalits are now entering a track of honor and fair socialization.

Right to participation in Public Places/Ceremonies

Invitation to Dalits by non-Dalits in any private feast is quite rare; whereas the Dalits always try to satisfy non-Dalits and invite them on all occasions. Though the latter join, they do not take food in most cases. In the villages, the Dalits take undue efforts to satisfy the non-Dalits by preparing separate menu and dishes beyond their capacity. In many cases, if the non-Dalits like to invite the Dalits in private/community/marriage ceremony, they arrange separate seating and menu for the Dalits. In fact, the non-Dalits use the Dalits for different errands and simply compensate them by changing few words of gratitude and manage to write off their due wages or recognition. The Dalits feel strongly deprived in festive or arrangement of feast by private/community or in other marriage feasts in the locality. In the funerals of non-Dalits, normally Dalits attend but they are discouraged and are not allowed to stay longer. On the contrary, the presence of non-Dalits in the funerals of Dalits is very rare in villages.

In most of the cases in the villages, the Dalits are not invited to any government programs, like national, international days etc. They may stand outside and view the programs from distance. At NGO programs, Dalits are less deprived than other institutes. In the policy

making or decision-making programs of the local authorities, the Dalits are strongly discriminated to attend. They are not invited and if at times their leaders are invited who maintain to keep silent; thereby all decisions are taken by the non-Dalits without any opposition. The Dalits are discouraged from taking part in politics; as a result they have no representation in the power structure of the locality, and they remain deprived for decades.



An Indian Team headed by former Executive Director of Caritas India visited a Rishi-Munda village at Shamnagor, Satkhira on Sept. 2017.

It is the responsibility of the government to ensure basic human rights of the Dalits community and protect them from all sorts of discrimination. As a signatory to the core international human rights treaties, the Government of Bangladesh has the obligation to promote and protect human rights for all, including those discriminated on the grounds of caste, work and descent. With a view to upholding its international obligations to eliminate all forms of discrimination, the Government

needs to duly consider and implement elimination of caste-based discrimination. In order to improve the lives of Dalits, there is an urgent need for legislative changes such as the adoption of anti-discriminatory law, recently proposed by the Law Commission of Bangladesh. To promote the socio-economic status of Dalits and other excluded groups in Bangladesh, the Government should establish a special commission or create a special cell in the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to oversee the developmental affairs of the excluded groups. For effective implementation of the human rights obligations of the Government, the NHRC should furthermore address the Dalits issue as a priority agenda by requesting a national study on discrimination on the grounds of caste, work and descent. The key national priorities to improve the situation of Dalits in Bangladesh should be set in a comprehensive national action plan to eliminate caste, work and descent-based discrimination. However, to ensure education for all the government should establish school in these community; to educate the old people should establish night schools. The government and non-government organizations should establish employment opportunities for their income generation, livelihood and socio-economic dignity; need to ensure health facilities, medical and nutrition support, need to ensure an adequate standard of living and housing facilities for Dalits, including adequate civic amenities such as water, sanitation, drainage, electricity etc and finally need to improve economic, social and cultural condition of the community people for their comprehensive development and to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

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