

3RD CYCLE OF THE UNIVERSAL PERIODIC REVIEW (30th Session, 2018)

Dalit in Bangladesh: Out of the total population, of approximately 160 million, the estimate number of Dalits in Bangladesh ranges between 3.5 to 5.5 million¹ (the current estimate is 6.5 million). Caste systems and what is broadly referred to as 'untouchability' practices are most commonly associated with Hinduism, but in Bangladesh these traditions and practices have also been adopted by sections of the Muslim majority².

Historically, Dalits have been oppressed by dominant groups in society and the majority are under-privileged and struggle for job opportunities. Dalits in Bangladesh are often forced to undertake specific types of labour as a consequence of their assigned caste status. As a result of their limited access to employment Dalits are almost exclusively working in 'the service sector' performing unclean jobs in urban areas such as street sweeping, manual scavenging and burying dead bodies. Many Dalits are stigmatised as a result of their profession and experience isolation and social exclusion³.

Moreover, in Bangladesh Dalits face discrimination in their access to housing and land. They are segregated in colonies and unhygienic slum areas and are often systematically excluded from access to water and sanitation⁴. The majority of Dalits are landless and their houses are often located in abandoned fields, on khash (government owned) land near roads or pasture. Dalits face widespread poverty, ostracization and food insecurity and are subjected to land grabbing, violence and forced conversion⁵. Dalit students face exclusion from many educational institutions along with discriminatory practices such as being forced to clean classrooms, fetch water or compelled to sit on separate benches.

Status of Implementation (2nd UPR Cycle): During the second cycle, two recommendations of the 196 made to Bangladesh addressed Dalit rights and/or caste-based rights violations. Further nine recommendations referred to the rights of vulnerable groups.

In 2012, the Prime Minister issued a Directive calling for special measures to include Bede, Dalit and Harijan communities in the Social Safety Net Programme. The 2014 Bangladesh National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) expressed a commitment to end social and economic discrimination through legislative and other measures, including access to basic services - education, health, nutrition, family planning and water supply and sanitation. Yet, Dalits have long been unable to access these programmes due to the lack of knowledge about their rights and stigma that prevented them from seeking and gaining enrollment. Moreover, while general schemes to promote enjoyment of equal rights and social and economic inclusion indirectly address the needs of Dalit communities, they must be accompanied by strategies and corresponding budgetary allocations to meet the specific needs of the group.

KEY ISSUES FACED BY DALIT COMMUNITY IN BANGLADESH:

- Lack of disaggregated data on the Dalits population in Bangladesh.
- Dalit face discrimination in their access to housing and land. They are segregated in colonies and unhygienic slum areas and are often systematically excluded from access to water and sanitation.
- The majority of Dalit are landless and their houses are often located in abandoned fields, on khash (government owned) land near roads or pasture.
- Dalit in Bangladesh are often forced to undertake specific types of labour as a consequence of their assigned caste status and are most commonly associated with the profession of "Jat sweepers" or "Harijan".
- Dalit students face exclusion from many educational institutions along with discriminatory practices such as being forced to clean classrooms, fetch water or compelled to sit on separate benches.
- Dalits face discrimination in accessing medical amenities in public, private and even NGO facilitated centers.
- Dalit women are particularly vulnerable to untouchability practices and violence.
- Dalit people lack political empowerment, without representation at all levels of political parties, with an exception of the tea garden areas.

Dalits also face severe water and sanitation crisis both in urban and rural areas, yet the national development activities have not yet prioritized the issue of water and sanitation for Dalit. Dalits experience discrimination in accessing medical amenities in public, private and even NGO facilitated centers. However, there is no official recognition that specific groups, like Dalit, are particularly vulnerable to ill-health. What is more, Dalit people lack political empowerment, without representation at all levels of political parties, with an exception of the tea garden areas. However, there are no specific legislative mechanisms, ensuring marginalized communities' participation in political parties, other than the right to vote.

Additionally, the Government's education programme is supposed to focus on marginalised communities' education, yet it does not have any specific programmes for Dalit children. Although an affirmative action quota was introduced for Dalit students in public universities, yet the lack of legal recognition of their identity prevents them from taking this privilege.

IN THIS REGARD THE GOVERNMENT OF BANGLADESH IS RECOMMENDED TO:

- 1) Take immediate action to pass and ensure an effective implementation of the draft Anti-discrimination Act.
- 2) Develop and implement a national action plan to eliminate work and descent-based discrimination, with a particular emphasis on Dalit women and children.
- 3) Include disaggregated data on caste in the next census and undertake a comprehensive study on the human rights situation of Dalit.
- 4) Include Dalit communities and the principle of non-discrimination in the National Sanitation Strategy and National Strategy for Water Supply and Sanitation.
- 5) Ensure special and adequate budget allocations for Dalit colonies with the aim towards closing the gap between them and other communities.
- 6) Initiate programmes designed to meet the particular needs of Dalit women along the lines of trainings on Income Generating Activities provided under the Social Safety Net Programme.
- 7) Give special attention to the primary and tertiary level education of Dalits, including discrimination free access and equal employment opportunities post education.
- 8) Address the situation of Dalit in their access to a good standard of housing and land ownership – provide improved housing facilities to Dalit in the urban areas and stop forceful evictions without an adequate rehabilitation.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 Iftekhar Uddin Chowdhury, "Caste-based discrimination in South Asia: a study of Bangladesh", working paper series, vol. III, No. 07 (Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, 2009), p. 2.
IDSN Briefing note on Bangladesh, 2015: <http://idsn.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/IDSN-briefing-note-Bangladesh-2015.pdf> (accessed February 2017)
- 3 A/HRC/31/56 (pp. 14)
- 4 A/HRC/31/56 (pp. 16)
- 5 Minority Rights Group: Under threat: The challenges facing religious minorities in Bangladesh (2016). http://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/MRG_Rep_Ban_Oct16_ONLINE.pdf (p. 9)