

Political Participation of Dalit Women in Dhaka city, Bangladesh

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1. Introduction

The issue of Dalit women's participation in politics has to be understood in connection with the overall socio-cultural, economic and political situation of Dalit people in Bangladesh society. The extreme level of exclusion and marginality that dictates almost all the aspects of these 'untouchable' people's lives sheds direct impact on the aspirations that Dalit women possess or actions that they take in. The central focus of this study has been to explore the current state of Dalit women's participation in politics – at national level as well as at local and community level. The study examined the understanding and behaviour of Dalit women that are pertinent for assessing their perception and action with respect to politics. The findings of the study bring forth the fact that members of Dalit communities in Bangladesh are subject to continuous deprivation, exclusion and neglect – no aspect of Dalit women's life can be explained in isolation from this grim reality that characterize the life of whole community.

The major patterns of marginality lie with the caste-based discrimination that determines almost all the aspects of lives of men, women and children in the community. Their choice of profession, housing and settlement, access to services and facilities including health and education, social mobility or range of interaction, rights and obligations as well identity and status are determined by the caste-based position that society ascribe upon them in a hereditary way. Caste-based differences take significant class-based form too – in reality caste and class become intertwined in a complex way. State policies endorse and uphold discriminations thus cultivated by society from generation to generation.

Not that Dalit women don't experience gender disparities within their household and community – in fact, patriarchal values and practices are quite strong. However, exclusion and deprivation enforced by majority Bengali Muslim people are so strong and overwhelming that in most of the cases Dalit women themselves have been seen to be unwilling to highlight or even recognize the gendered inequalities that their own community imposes. This reality has far reaching implication in determining the values and attitudes as well as behaviour and action of women in relation to politics. Putting simply, the people – both men and women – are too preoccupied in their struggle to overcome economic and social difficulties that they find it somewhat unworthy to get engaged in anything that are not directly related with their day by day pursuit of livelihood. Women have been found to be least interested in politics. Everyday struggle for earning the living is their priority, not the conscious political effort for addressing the root causes.

Nonetheless, a conclusion that Dalit women are not interested in politics or not being involved in political actions at all will be too simplified and misleading. For explaining their positions it is imperative that both caste- and class-based disparities as well as gendered realities are taken into consideration. State, society and community enforce these ideologies along with patriarchal values and practices. What women do or don't do are largely shaped

by this complex reality. The overall condition of Dalit community is not fully static; transformations in values and behaviours are not quite unintelligible - though achievements are clearly nowhere near what it should have been.

The focus of the study was to understand the condition of Dalit women and assessing the level of their involvement in politics. By 'politics' the study basically referred to politics that takes place at national and community level. It was conducted among the Dalit women living in different parts of Dhaka city. The study method comprised of four Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) that included the adult women members of the Dalit community. It also included 8 life histories, 52 interviews with highlight on socio-economic-demographic aspects. Besides these, taking part in a number of meetings, seminars and workshops arranged by concerned agencies or organizations informed the study significantly. Secondary sources were also reviewed – though there is no abundance of study or ethnography on Dhaka's Dalit women per se.

2. The Situation of Dalit People in general and Dalit Women in particular

2.1 There is no national statistics on Dalits: The number varies from 4-5 million

There is no national statistics as regards what the total number of Dalits in Bangladesh – different sources provide different numbers. One source claims that there are 400000 Dalits living in Bangladesh and they are mostly involved in sweeping and cleaning jobs in the cities. Another source claimed the number of Dalits is 500000. A large migration of Dalits from India to different cities of Bangladesh happened around 1620's. A massacre took place in Dhaka by the Burmese pirates around 1624-26, to remove the dead bodies from the city Dalits were brought in here from different parts of India [then the part of the same country]. (source: Banglapaedia, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, Dhaka). But the large migration of Dalit people to Dhaka had happened after it had achieved the status of municipality in 1864. Later on, when Dhaka became the capital of East Bengal more people were brought in here from Indian cities such as Madras, Kanpur, Nagpur to work as sweeper. In Dhaka city and its neighbouring Narayanganj town Dalits live in in 27 colonies and the number of Dalits living here is around 35-40000. There has not been any systematic effort from Government for proper enumeration of Dalit people - there is no segregated data available either. However, Dhaka City Corporation generally claims that the number of its cleaning workers is around ten thousand.

As cleaning workers, Dalits at their arrival were allocated with some land to live in the cities. With the increase of their number that allocation of land and housing did not increase proportionately. Moreover, they do not have land rights, so generally they are landless people. Generations after generations Dalits are deprived from their very basic right to land and housing. They thus suffer from deep sense of insecurity and lack the sense of belongingness to Bangladesh. This situation encourages Dalits to live in between Bangladesh and India (their ancestor's place of origin) and provides ground for government officials as well as dominant class (Bengali Muslims) to marginalize them further.

2.2 Caste based discrimination: Identity by birth and by profession

It will not be right to assume that Dalits in Bangladesh belong to any homogenous group. However, irrespective of their religious identity or professional involvement Dalits have to face largely the same patterns of exclusions and marginalities. Their identity, status and role are ascribed hereditarily and they have to take up the profession of their family. Most of the discriminations are thus based on descent and work though the ways the discriminations are experienced differ with respect to religious identity and professional belongingness.

2.3 Variation within the Dalit Community

Dalit community in Bangladesh is comprised of people with various professional positions. There is no national statistics as regards what percentage of Dalits belongs to which profession. However, in the cities they are mostly engaged in the occupation of cleaning. In non-urban settings Dalits work in different areas e.g. tea plantation, fishery, lather processing and shoe making. They also work for exhuming and dissecting the dead human bodies. They all have to go through bitter experiences in their everyday life – the level of sufferings and deprivation varies with respect to what profession they have to undertake for their living and how they come into interaction with the people in greater Bengali Muslim society.

Besides differences in profession, there are variation in language and religion. Besides Bengali they speak Telegu, Hindi and other minor languages. By religion they belong to Hindu, Christian as well as Muslim community.

Moreover, in Bangladesh Dalits have around 16 sub-caste groups.

Sometimes this difference in language, profession and religion causes serious strife among the Dalits. For a greater solidarity and political movements this difference works as strong barrier.

To understand the variation of overall situation from community to community we can consider how the experience of a Dalit woman belonging to *Bede* community [water gypsies whose basic profession is of snake charmer] varies significantly from the experiences of a woman in *Sweeper* community.

The pattern of subordination and exclusion varies even with respect to which area or locality they live in and how their relationship with the greater society has been shaped historically.

2.3 Overall socio-economic condition: Commonness in experience of exclusion

2.3.1 Accommodation: Inhumane living condition

Dalits live in quarters that are too small, congested and unhealthy. They have been living in these tiny rooms for many generations. With decades being passed the size of the families have increased manifold but they have been forced to accommodate themselves in the same small room. A Dalit family might have been provided a place for settlement 40 years earlier

– they are still living in the same space though by this time two new generations have been added up in that family. Consequently 12/14 members of a family – belonging to three generations – have to live in a single room.

In some cases, living spaces are also used as income earning place (i.e. they use the congested living place as ‘factory’ for making or processing the goods such as pickle or candle that sell or trade). Therefore, Dalits are left to live an inhumane life in a tiny room with utmost shortage of space.

2.3.2 Hygiene situation

The places where Dalits live are unclean and unhygienic. Along with shortages in living space, the lack of water supply and electricity make their lives yet more difficult. Sometimes they have to wait for water until 11 o’clock in the morning – they are unable to take their breakfast before this.

Women and children use water from limited sources and they have to invest significant time for collecting water. This again reduces their work time.

Number of toilets available is insufficient in relation to number of inmates. Almost all the time toilets remain unclean.

Inhabitants have to raise pigs around this limited space – this contributes to worsening of overall situation. Collecting and sharing water is not only time consuming, it also works as a major cause of chaos and conflict among the households. Women suffer seriously in the process.

2.3.3 Education: Illiteracy is widespread

Interviews and discussions showed it clearly that the rate of education among Dalits is very low – though any reliable statistics is yet to be carried out.

The rate of Dalit men attending school is not that high. Since no segregated national statistics is available, it is difficult to compare the literacy situation of Dalit people with the situation of majority Bengali people. The literacy scenario among Dalit women is dismal in the same way.

The educational prospect of next generation is not bright either. The parents interviewed hold this view clearly that boys and girls from new generation are not interested to go to school. Only a small number of Dalit children are now going to a local school which provides education in Telegu language. Only a few Dalit boys and girls who could carry on up to College level (college level here means class 11 and 12 – it is the stage that students enter after completing secondary school with 10 years schooling).

Financial hardship has been identified as the major cause for their failure to pursue education. In many cases young boys and girls have to give priority to earning their living than to

attending school. Parents also prefer their children engaging in income generating works and assisting household earnings. A Dalit mother from *Bede* community explains the situation:

“My sons and daughters don’t go to school. What can I do? They go for showing their skills with serpents so that they can earn a few Takas. When would they get the time for reading and writing? Only a few Dalit boys and girls are going to school – still they wouldn’t get a good job. A boy from our neighborhood is now studying in a college. If he doesn’t get a good job, other boys will lose interest in education. Education is not for us – especially not for our daughters.”

Thus the prospect of not getting any good job even after attending schools or colleges hold Dalits seriously from pursuing education. This hopelessness is true in case of girls as well as boys.

2.3.1 *Dalit women’s situation: Most marginalized amongst the marginal people*

There is significant similarities in the ways in which Dalit women experience marginality and oppression in their everyday lives. In most of the Dalit families men are the main earning members. Women have to depend on their husbands’ income for living. However, often women are left behind or abandoned by their husbands. These women then fight hard to find a job. Among some Dalit people a widow is not allowed to get married again. However, in *Bede* [water gypsies] community it is not hard to find that a woman left by her husband finds a way out to earn her living. A *Bede* woman describes:

“In our community husbands often leave behind their wives. When a husband leaves his wife and doesn’t come back within a year – it is then taken as a divorce. We don’t care if our husbands leave us. In our community we are allowed to get married as many times as we want. Here we all earn our own living. A woman can get married with any man once she is divorced. Here women moves ahead and refuses to they refuse to stay behind.”

On the other hand, women from Telegu speaking community [‘Telegu speaking people’ are one of the many Dalit communities that live in Bangladesh – by profession they also are mainly sweepers] are not seen to be much interested in protesting what their husbands do. The general perception of these women is that a husband is like God.

Despite the variation in composition of Dalit community, there is significant similarities in the ways in which Dalit women experience marginality and oppression in their everyday lives. In most of the Dalit families men are the main earning members. Women have to depend on their husbands’ income for living. From this research, it has been found that among 52 women, 26 are Homemakers; from the rest 13 women earn 3-4000 taka regularly, as they are government sweepers. Others are either irregular petty traders or non-government employees. A very insecure job circumstance and low-income opportunity keep them dependent on marriage.

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3. Forms of Livelihoods: Everyday struggle against severe hardships

3.1 From Peasant to Sweeper: Profession defines lower social status

The advent and settlement of Dalit people in Bangladesh had happened in different historical phases. Though most of the Dalits in contemporary Bangladesh are sweepers, sweeping is not their original or primordial profession. They had to choose this profession under different circumstances at different historical periods – as we have described earlier. This professional identity has gradually made ground for their lower and neglected social status. Because of the dishonour and repugnance that this profession entails, Dalits in contemporary Bangladesh are unwilling to stick to this profession. They want to move beyond this professional identity. One respondent described her feeling:

“We were not sweepers in past. We were peasants. We became sweepers after we migrating here. Everyone calls us ‘Sweeper’. It is a bad word – it bears bad connotation. We know that we are members of a fallen behind community. People measure us by the job that we do – they don’t take us as human being of their same status. This is not right!”

3.2 Different professions – yet lower status

Among Dalits men are the main bread earners. They are engaged in professions like ‘sweeper’, ‘barber’, ‘bede’, ‘medicine seller’, ‘hawker’ etc. A few women from Dalit communities are engaged in income generating activities. These women also are engaged in occupations mentioned above. A small number of women are becoming active in politics and taking up NGO jobs in recent time.

Dalit men and women have clearly expressed their willingness to leave the job of sweeping. In the root of this desire for changing profession is the social stigma that their current profession brings in. However they cannot find a suitable alternative as they lack educational qualification and society is not yet fully prepared to welcome them to any new job. They believe that their identity as ‘Dalit’ is the biggest barrier to getting a better job.

Many Dalit women now think that involvement in income generating activities would bring them improved social status. The appeal was quite strong to get job, no matter how small it is, but Dalit women want a City Corporation's or government's job which will secure their future and status at home. The necessity is so high that due to lack of education and training they realistically asks for sweeper's job; although, they hate this occupation but they continues with them. One respondent says:

“A person dependent on others can do nothing. A woman with no autonomy cannot protest even when her husband leaves her behind or throws her out of the house. Their sufferings are mostly due to their inability to earn living. We have to educate our daughters so that they can become self-reliant.”

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4. Excluded living place, harsh life-Style and distinct language: An identity of extreme segregation

4.1 Settlement pattern and distinct language: Reinforcement of excluded identity

The ghettos or enclaves in which Dalits live define their identity in significant ways. Their segregated settlements epitomize their overall exclusion from the greater society. It is because of their mistrust and insecurity about the majority Bengali population that they prefer to stay within their own community and with their 'own' people.

Poor economic conditions do not allow Dalit people to live outside their ghetto. Even if some families can afford, they would not get a house since Bengali owners are unwilling to rent house to Dalit individual or family. Thus the pre-determined 'fate' forces them to remain within a location and situation that they always want to escape. A Dalit woman described the situation with sadness:

“We live in the mouth of a serpent.”

Along with the reinforcement of exclusion by typical physical settlement, Dalits are forced to the margin with reference to their use of different distinct languages.

4.2 Dressing defines identity

They have particular style of wearing clothes that makes them easily distinguishable. This distinction in dressing again provides clue to their Bengali neighbours for contemptuous behaviour. Dalits do not feel good with the way they are treated in the greater society with

reference to their dressing; they are even ready to change their traditional ways of wearing dresses. One respondent explains:

“We have a distinct style of wearing a sari. Anyone can identify us as a Dalit. It would be good for us if we could change this style. When I go out with my mother, many people ask me if I am from the slum over there.”

4.3 *Everyday Exclusion: Dominant Bengali Muslims continuously remind the difference*

Dalit men and women also believe that their identity as ‘Dalit’ means that they are not of similar status compared to the majority Bengali people – they are of lower caste and class. May be that members of greater Bengali community does not always express their attitude, but whenever an issue of conflicting interest comes to the fore Bengali men and women stress the fact that they are ‘Dalits’ – not someone from majority people. A woman describes possible scenarios:

“Our Bengali friends do generally mingle with us, but when it matters they don’t hesitate to stress upon the point that we are only ‘Dalits’ – not their ‘own’ people. If it happens that any of our girls falls in love with a boy from a Bangali family, they would say, “You are *Methors* – you are descendants of *Methors*. How dare you dream to be our relative?”

[*Note:* The word *methor* generally means sweepers or cleaners; however it particularly refers to a cleaner who cleans sewerage. The word is derogative in the sense that when a Bengali speaker uses this word s/he tries to stress that ‘You *methor* – you clean my excretion!’]

“(Bengali) People hate us even though we take part in same meetings or associations. As soon as they learn that we come from *methor colony* [the ghettos particularly earmarked for the housing of the *methors*] they call us ‘*methorer baccha* (child of a *Methor*)’. It’s not written on our forehead that we are *methor* – yet people abuse us by calling this.”

4.4 *Strong Alienation: “They always say that Bangladesh is not the our ‘home country’”*

Dalit people always live with a strong sense of alienation – they are continuously given the message that Bangladesh is not their country. Discriminating behaviour on part of majority Bengali people strengthens the feeling. Thus the Dalits are haunted by a feeling of ‘homelessness’. It’s not surprising in the given reality that Dalits now wish to send their next generation to neighbouring India. A few Dalit families have already managed to send their sons and daughters to India – they have been married over there. Other families have sold all their properties in Bangladesh and bought properties in India. They look forward to migrating to India in future – probably the sooner the better!

Administrators and officials in their everyday interaction with Dalits frequently ask them to leave this country and go to India. A Dalit woman describes:

“One day we went to the Ward Commissioner’s for seeking a fair judgment as regards a misdeed. In reply to our plea for justice he asked us to leave this country and go to India. He said, ‘Go to India – India is your country.’”

In practice, instead of protecting the legal rights of Dalits on land, City Corporation's Ward commissioners generally withdraw the administrative support from the Dalits. This attitude and practice contributes toward the reinforcement of long-standing feeling of alienation. 'If a riot takes place the majority Bengali Muslims will eliminate us' – this is the thinking that they cannot get escape from.

5. Violence against Dalits: Caste, class and gender differences are cross cutting issue

5.1 Violence from outside: Systematic and everyday violence by dominant Bengali neighbours

Both Dalit men and women suffer from various kinds of violence inflicted by Bengali people in their everyday life. Because of their overall inferiority and marginality they cannot even protest against these unjust acts. A person victim of such action reflects:

“People in Dalit Community always suffer from insecurities of different kinds. Any time they may become subject to violent acts of Bengali neighbours. Bengali people throw pieces of bricks on the roof of their living place deep at night; snatch away their property and peep through the windows. When a Dalit enters the area of Bengali people, they comment bad things. They use scornful words and slang when they see a Dalit girl.”

Dalits generally don't get any fair remedy when they become subject to any violent act or vandalism done by an Bengali person. If they go to the police station for seeking help, polices don't take the issues serious – they, in fact, don't respond at all. If a Bengali person injures a Dalit and leave him dying on the road, nobody would come forward to take care of him or take him to the hospital. Even if the injured Dalit person is taken to a hospital, hospital authorities would not admit him as a patient.

“We can't live in peace. Often we have to get involved in quarrels with Bengalis. They enter into our house by force and beat us. They rob our property. We can't even protest. My living place invaded twice by them – they robbed all my properties”.

5.2 Violence from within/ Domestic violence

Even if a Dalit woman in Dhaka somehow manages to save herself from outside harassment, she cannot escape the experiences of violence within the family. If a husband is not earning and wife claims money for home management, she gets beaten. When a husband gets drunk the wife is supposed to accept it; otherwise she will be physically harassed or at least will be subject to severe verbal abuse by the husband. These are every day phenomena.

When it goes beyond a level of tolerance, women complain to the community *panchayet* (a system explained bellow). Men are the sole member of *panchayet*, so they ally with their own gender to secure their position within the community and give unfavorable judgment to the complain of women. Even, in case of politically very active woman, it is found that husband prohibits wife to attend meetings and going outside and if the wife disobeys that order for the interest of women and community, husband physically and verbally abuses her.

When asked why women tolerate violence they gave explanation with reference to religious values; however, they also talked about the situation of their socio-economic dependence on their husbands. Their thoughts suggest that they take up 'co-operative conflict' as their strategy to sustain with their most important resources i.e. marriage and family.

Gender discrimination at home disadvantages them at work and public sphere. One of the respondents said

I could not attend my job today as last night he beat me so much my whole body was aching, and it happened as he was drunk, I lost work day. This is not unusual, rather its quite a regular event... why cannot i stop him? How would I? My parents are poor, I will not be able to take shelter even for few days. Forget about me, even our leader, didi [sister] faces same kind of disrespect from her husband. Now after she got the job in the NGO, earning regular salary, her husband respects her. You give us job, any job; we will be able to do politics even.

Household work, child-care and family's responsibility, and experience of violence limits women's self-dependence. Women's political mission gets affected by this situation.

6. Access to Justice System: Dalits, in general, has limited choice while women, in particular, are denied most

Almost all the respondents and interviewees alleged that they don't get any fair treatment in any session of *bichar and salish* (sessions of arbitration or trial). *Bicharoks* (the person who presides the arbitration session) are generally from Bengali community who, they allege, never play an objective or neutral role. Particularly when the allegation is against a Bengali, they see there no possibility of a fair judgment. This is why many Dalit victims do not complain against the wrongs done to them by Bengali people. Benglai arbitrators take bribes from the guilty person and carry out the judgment in unfair way. An incident came out in discussion:

A Bangali person took heroin and came to Dalits locality. Here he died from excessive use of the drug. Later Bangalis blamed that Dalits killed the man. A *bichar* session followed the incident. The verdict was that the people in Dalit settlement must pay a penalty of 4 hundred thousand taka. It was a big amount – still they all shared the burden and paid the penalty. They had to pay because otherwise they would have been evicted from the settlement. On the other hand there have been number of incidents in which Bangalis invaded houses of Dalits and robbed them. There has not been any penalty to any Bengali person for these misdeeds.

The implication of such events is that Dalit men or women don't ask for justice though the incidences of their being harassed, tortured or victimized are so frequent.

7. Dalit's Panchayet – system of community governance: Manifestation of patriarchy

Dalits have a system of arbitration and governance of their own. They call it *panchayet*. The basic aim of the system is to resolve the internal disputes. Here, Dalits solve the disputes

among the people of their own community. However, this *panchayet* system is of no use when the dispute is between a person from his or her own community and a person from the majority Bengali community.

In cases where *panchayet* works for resolving internal problems, sessions are fully dominated by male members. The norm is that Dalit women even would not participate in the *panchayet*. A woman is called on to remain present in the session only when she has direct involvement with the issue of contention. A woman describes:

Women generally do not ask for any remedy even if they are subject to serious wrongs. They are too scared to ask for justice. This thinking is so strong that society will criticize a woman if she asks for remedy or complains against men. Women of our community are not allowed to express their opinion in *panchayet*. A woman's husband, father or brother would talk on her behalf. Men representing women is the accepted norm.

Respondents added that in most cases, people of their community do not even seek *Bichar* (judgment) facility from the formal bodies that handle such problems. They suspect that they would not get any fair judgment there. However, it is not fully uncommon that when informal justice process fails to provide a fair judgment women seek remedy from formal institutions including police, ward commissioner or local government authority. A respondent said:

“When they deliver an unfair verdict, we refuse to accept it. We go to police station or to a big leader for seeking help. We also seek help from chairman and members of union councils.”

“Generally we don't like filing a formal criminal case. We do not like going to the court. If a husband leaves his wife, then her parents give in her marriage with someone else. We do not go and file a case regards the matter.”

The caste discrimination is so high and complex that women rarely address gender discrimination issues. Dalit women try to listen to their men, as they feel insecure in front of ruling community and dominant religious group. Thus, they keep themselves prepared for tolerating internal violence.

8. Women's participation in the public space: Lack of education, occupational backwardness and gendered social ideology limit mobility

This research also reveals it clearly that women in Dalit communities do not exercise any significant role in public spaces – be it within the community or beyond. This absence is due to many reasons. Their professional identity and associated social denigration works as the ground for keeping them passive with respect to community or society related issue. However, lack of education and conscious outlook with respect to collective concerns are also identified as important contributing factors. Whereas they cannot send their children to educational institutions because of financial constrains and exclusions, backwardness in education holds them back from taking up new professions or moving beyond traditionally defined areas of work. It is recent development that a few Dalit girls started to go to school –

however, in most of the cases they fail to carry on their study much longer. Consequently, number of educated men or women has not reached to any significant level.

On the other hand it is quite uncommon for the women to move beyond the hereditarily determined profession. A number of respondents have talked about the ways in which caste based differences play role in restraining them from getting a good job. A Dalit woman comments:

“It’s not likely that we can get the job that we want. Rich people can bribe and get a job. We don’t get a good job even if we do our best. We are Dalit people – we are of lower class and status. When the employers come to know that we belong to Dalit community, they are no more willing to provide us the job.”

8.1 Thrust is there for moving ahead though the reality is tough

Becoming ‘Sweeper’ is the only way though which a Dalit woman can come out from the private domain and participate in public realm. However, since the profession of ‘sweeping’ involves repugnance and clear disregard on part of greater society, Dalit women are no longer interested to take up this job. They always strive for finding out a job other than becoming a ‘Sweeper’. However, social segregation as well as lack of adequate or proper educational qualification again holds them back from taking up any suitable job. A Dalit woman explains the situation:

“We want to have education. But one needs money for his/her education. We will be able to change our profession if we can get educated. Then we won’t need to take up this disgraceful job of sweeping – nobody will call us a ‘sweeper’ that they do with disdain and contempt. Nowadays Dalit girls refuse to take up the job of sweeping even if the proposal comes from the City Corporation. I also had the offer from ‘City Corporation’ that I refused to take. I will rather work much harder in any other profession than doing this job. People look down upon you when you are in this job. I don’t like to do work of sweeping anymore.”

During recent years a number women have got involved in other jobs than sweeping. For example many make wax and do boutique works; others sell things from door to door – working as hawker.

8.2 Public street, Public work: Not for Dalit women?

However, beyond these professional involvements, Dalit women feel discouraged to come out into public space for various other causes. This discouragement emanates from their overall position and status within the greater society; the ways in which majority Bengali Muslim men and women behave toward them is one major source of insecurity and vulnerability that they perceive. Bengali men – particularly boys – mistreat Dalit girls in different ways whenever they are seen on city streets or roads and passages of the locality. Dalits girls feel insecure since they have observed that Bengali boys in most of the occasions take it as their ‘right’ or ‘privilege’ that they would physically touch or push a Dalit girl when they see her on the street. Teasing a Dalit girl is very much common among the Bengali boys. This insecurity holds the girls back from going outside their house. Dalit men

also do not feel good to send a female member of their household outside for work or education. A Dalit woman explains the situation:

“I got job offer from different places but my husband didn’t allow me do any. He rather wanted me to live inside the house.”

8.3 Traditional systems and institutions: Yet changes are happening

The system of *Panchayet* – Dalit people’s own system of settling conflict and making arbitration – is one of the stronger institutions within the community through which women could play role beyond household and as regards collective issues. However, our study showed that women’s participation in arbitration sessions conducted by *panchayet* is not of any significant level. One woman respondent explains:

“No women are allowed to take part in the *panchayet*. I’ve never seen a woman participating in any *salish* session being conducted by men. If, by any chance, a woman goes to a *salish* session and makes her voice hard, male members will not take it easily. They will vilify that woman. They will say that the woman is of no character – she has got no sense of proportion and has violated the norms of society. They will say that the woman should be thrown out of the community. She is a bad woman. She should be rebuked seriously – they will say”.

Another Dalit woman reflects:

“I am involved with the Dalit Women Forum. Yet I have not been able to participate in any *salish* as yet. My husband doesn’t want me to go to a *salish*. I wish I could go there and speak on behalf of Dalit women. I hope someday I will take part in *panchayet* along with my team of Dalit women.”

However, many Dalit women have expressed their unwillingness to go to any *shamity* [*shamity* is a Bengali word for cooperatives or cooperative society; however in cotemporary Bangladesh by *shamity* poor women generally refers to nongovernmental organizations that offer micro credit or work with savings programmes. Generally speaking the term has become synonymous to NGO in today’s society.] One woman opines:

“I don’t always like going to *shamity*. I, in my family, have many works to do. However, when the *shamity* people feel that they need me, they call me. I generally go to the meetings in response to such call. Otherwise I don’t want to go.”

A few other Dalit women expressed their position by and large using the same language:

“I don’t usually go outside my house. I feel insecure when I see too many people.”

We have seen that only a few women from Dalit communities are involved with different organizations. Some of these organizations are NGOs. These NGOs carry on different vocational trainings, income generating activities and awareness building programmes. Few Dalit women are also involved with ‘Dalit Human Rights Organization’, which strives to create a platform from which to pursue the rights of Dalit people. A number women involved

with this organization have traveled to places like Bangalore and Gujarat of India and Kathmandu of Nepal.

However, most Dalit women feel that they have the liberty to go anywhere if they need to. They don't think anything would restrain them from going public or pressing their demands to the authorities if the situation forces them to do so. They were recalling the occasions when many Dalit women gathered together in front of Bangladesh Supreme court and national press club to express their protest.

Because of their overall position of vulnerability, the Dalits always find them less guarded with respect to violence or wrong doings on part of majority Bengali Muslims. This sense of insecurity and vulnerability force them to keep the women members away from doing any work for making a living. Dalit women interviewed in this study have talked about the ways in which Dalit girls are mistreated and physically harassed by Bengali boys. A woman from sweeper community describes:

“Girls from our community don't want to go out for doing work. The situation outside has become more hostile nowadays. Men behave aggressively when they see a good looking girl. Our girls don't want to go out. We also don't want to send them outside.”

Thus the perception of hostility with respect to outside environment reinforces the structural exclusion and creates an environment in which both men and women feel discouraged to get engaged in public space – this discouragement makes the ground for non-involvement in politics.

9. Political Participation of Dalit Women

The findings of the research suggest it clearly that level of involvement in politics on part of Dalit women is yet to reach any significant level. Only a small number of women have become somewhat active as regards to their right in the community who are again involved with organizations of 'Dalit Human Rights'; these are the organizations that provide them platform for taking part in meetings, protest, rallies or marches. A few other women participate in political activities through the programmes conducted by the NGOs with which they are involved. Nevertheless, none of these involvements was spontaneous at the beginning. In most cases, the related NGOs and male members of their families [who somehow are involved with such organizations] inspire women's participation in politics. A 60 years old Dalit woman Sharojini describes how her son inspires her involvement in politics:

“I did not use to like participating in any kind of political activity. In politics, one is always at risk of being harmed by the opponents. However, since my son started working for the local political party, I got inspiration from him and got involved in politics.”

She is of the opinion that women's participation in politics is likely to bring good from them. She thinks that for women it will be easier to press their rights realized if they get involved in politics. She added:

“A person needs to have some qualities to become a leader. If a person is bad tempered, if he/she is unwilling to go to the poor people and listen to their problems then there is no good in making him/her a leader. As our leader, we should choose a person would strongly stand beside us during odds. A woman willing to take part in politics should be humble and gentle. She should be caring about other people’s problems. I have no problem if my daughter in-law wants to get involved in politics. I want them go ahead and make prosper.”

However, woman like Sorojini is not common in Dalit community. A general unwillingness to take part in politics is evident among them. One major cause is that strong caste discrimination overshadows the gender discrimination. Women are not willing even to recognize or bring forth the issues of gender discrimination.

Though women’s participation in politics is very low, it has been seen that they are aware about many of their political rights and responsibilities – one of the expression of this awareness is that they cast their votes in different elections regularly. However, while casting their votes they are always the sole dictator in making decision who they should vote. Sometimes they make the choice of candidate by his or her own and on many occasions the male members of the family influence them. Not that in all cases that are easily persuaded by male members; it happens that even if their husbands ask them to vote for one person they may vote the other person because of their own consideration and choice. In such cases, they keep it secret that they have not followed what their husbands have advised. Moni Rani, a woman leader says:

“My husband told me to cast my vote for a candidate of his choice. However, I did not listen to his advice – I have voted the person who I thought eligible. I have voted the candidate of the party that I support. My husband will never know this. How will he know for whom I have cast my vote?”

Though very little significant leadership like Moni-Rani, Ratna is yet to emerge, almost all the women respondents interviewed have agreed that it will bring in good result for them if women come forward as educated and aware leader in Dalit community. This leadership can contribute not only for addressing the problems of Dalit women themselves but also for changing the condition of the whole community.

They are of the opinion that internal disputes among the Dalits on various issues holds them back from making advancement in general and making change in women’s condition in particular. Women leadership has also failed to flourish largely due to this cause. One of the respondents said:

“Segregation within the Dalits is very strong. When one Dalit person enters another Dalit’s room, the second person immediately starts washing the room. They say if a Dalit person takes water from the tap which belongs to another Dalit, he/she thinks the water of the tap will be polluted. If our own minds are filled with such repulsion, how can we expect to generate any collective position or platform? No woman leader can come up with such differences remaining in place.”

Respondents have opined that women’s wider participation in politics and emergence of leadership will be possible only if the root causes of exclusion, poverty and gender

deprivations are removed. Education and awareness about their situation is spreading among the community; and government as well as nongovernmental organizations takes strong initiatives for working with Dalit women.

If the causes of extreme poverty is properly addressed and accordingly work opportunities are created for women, moreover, organizations that will provide them support and training, women will be capable of asking for their rights. This will lead the community and society to become aware and responsive as regards improving the conditions of women – this is how respondents have expressed their observations. One respondent said:

“We will have to change our outlook. We have to realize that good changes will come along if we get ourselves involved in politics. If we can realize the benefits, we will be able to make time to take in activities along with our everyday work. If we get the realization that we are always being neglected and insulted as a Dalit, we will find ourselves motivated to involve in political activities. Women will be active about their rights and will take practical measures in collective way to protest the oppressions and exclusions. If a woman is not aware about her condition, how can one become active to change her position?”

A number of Dalit women interviewed for this study have identified themselves as members of local wing of two major political parties of the country – Awami League and BNP [Awami League is the party in power and BNP (Bangladesh Nationalist Party) is main opposition party]. These women participate in various meetings and rallies organized by local party wings.

In past Dalit people saw number of occasions in which they organized collective movements for pressing their demands to the government – in some of such occasions they achieved success. One such movement was for the recognition of Telegu language as medium of education. Women members of the Dalit community also took part in this movement. Before that movement, Telegu language was not taught in the schools where Dalit children attended. Dalits went into movement to ensure that Telegu is taken as medium of learning. Through the success of this movement, they also ensured that their own language is protected from being eliminated.

However, in case of political involvement the first obstacle that Dalit women face in general, is the reluctance on part of male members of their families to give permission to do so. Dalit women said that their husbands or fathers do not want them to get involved in politics. Moreover, Dalit women have to deal with a huge load of household chores including the tasks of cooking and looking after the kids. Dalit women said it takes them the whole day to do these works at home. They cannot manage time for political activities. One of the respondents Omela said:

“I’ve tons of works to do at home. After doing all these works there is hardly any time left for me to do anything like taking part in political works. Besides, my husband does not want me to get involved in politics. Yet, I am involved with the local wing of Awami League. My husband insists that I should not engage in any activity of the party. I tell him that he should rather allow me to go to the meetings as they at least entertain me with teas and snacks!”

Though they remained detached from any form of political activity throughout their lives, many older Dalit women have been found to be of the opinion that Dalit women in general should become more involved in politics at both national and local level. One of the older Dalit women Jugno Rani [55] said:

“I am not so young to be in politics anymore. Nevertheless, my daughter and my daughter-in-law are younger; they should give a thought about this. They can participate in meetings and gatherings; they are capable of engaging in political activities. But I have grown older – I cannot take part in politics.”

One of the respondents, Bulbul Rani [50] talked frankly about her unwillingness to take part in politics:

“I need the whole day to finish the household chores – when could I make time for doing other things? I do not have any wish to go to the Bengali clubs or Bengali society. In our community women generally do not get involved in politics – I think women might take part in politics only if they get adequate opportunity to do so.”

A few Dalit women expressed that they do not like getting involved with politics no matter what the form or pattern of politics is. Mita Rani describes the position:

“My husband is a political activist – I am not. I do not like it. I just hate the atmosphere around here. I do not let my children go out. What good can we achieve for us by taking part in voting or election? We are only concerned about what to eat and how to earn our living. We do not want to get beaten by political opponents. We are happy to stay within our society. That’s all.”

On the other hand, a few Dalit women expressed that they are very interested to get involved in politics. They said that they would get involved with politics in future if they get the chance. One young woman, Prokashamya said:

“I will take part in election someday. I want to be a leader of this society. I will try to accomplish good things for the society as my father has done already. Every society needs female leaders – no man can realize the problems of women better than a woman can. In our society all the women are busy with their household chores – when would they find time to participate in election? They are fully occupied with works like looking after the babies and cooking meals.”

9.2 Involvement in organized collective movements

As we have noted already there have been number of occasions in the past in which women from Dalit community took part actively in protest movements and contributed significantly toward championing the causes of the community. However, as level of political awareness and eagerness to participate in politics is very low, it is difficult to find out any regular organized political platform or organization among the women. Only very recently some organizations have started working among the Dalit community to promote the awareness of women and organize them in a collective forum.

Involvement of women in organizations like Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded's Rights Movements (BDERM) is one such development. However, this involvement is also very much limited within small number of women. This involvement has also been subject to a lot of social criticisms and obstruction. Unfortunately Women's movements or national political parties in Bangladesh have never brought the issues of Dalit people's right to the fore.

Recently a few developmental and civil society based organizations have taken the issues of Dalit people as important agenda in their programmes and activities. They are giving special focus as regards the rights of Dalit women. Organizations like Nagorik Uddyog, Nijera Kori or Research Initiative, Bangladesh (RIB) are working closely with people from Dalit community and undertaking programmes and researches with particular focus on their rights and exclusions.

9.3 Agency, Resistance and Individual's action

However, even in absence of organized platform or systematic effort, Dalit women don't hesitate to resist the oppressions and exploitations that they experience in their everyday life. It is important to recognize the agencies of these women. The events of resistance bring in far reaching positive impact upon the community. Individuals' sense of dignity and search for autonomy provide them the ground for protesting social injustices.

Events of protest and resistance inspire women in general to become aware about their subjugation. Such an event has happened recently where a young girl resisted strongly the decision of early marriage. Despite strong opposition from the girl her parents got the marriage happened. The girl continued her resistance and refused to go to her in-laws' house. Eventually the marriage ended up in divorce. The girl never got married again. She now does a job and earns her livelihood herself. The consequence of the event has been that men and women in wider community have become aware about the bad implications of forced marriage. Parents now give serious thought before taking a decision of early marriage.

10. Conclusion and way forward

From the foregoing analysis of Dalit women's overall situation it is clear that the issue of their participation in politics cannot be understood without full reference to the extreme exclusion and deprivation that feature everyday lives of Dalit people in general. Life is so harsh, marginal and stigmatized that without addressing the discriminations based upon caste and class, it would be difficult to bring fore gender based and intra-household inequalities and discrepancies. Whereas the community as a whole experiences severe inhumane treatment from the greater society and state, no policy or initiative is likely to bring in significant transformation in the situation without addressing the structural and systematic discriminations.

Despite such a grim reality of hopelessness it is worthy to note that the women members of Dalit community have not given up all hopes already. True that they are most occupied with their extreme destitution and their everyday struggle is fully focused on earning the living. True also is that they find the reality to be overwhelmingly shadowed by discrepancies based

on caste, class and gender. Still what is important is that they have clear awareness about the ways in which they are excluded and exploited; they also have considerable understanding as to how they can bring change by taking steps forward and working together. They manifest their agency at household as well as at community level – though this expression is still constrained and limited in effect. Importantly they now understand the significance of resistance and collectivity. They are aware about power relations and sees it clearly that politics can help them in significant way – though because of their experience with current regime of politics they are not yet fully willing to take part in national or mainstream politics.

With all these reluctance they are gradually coming up to join the collective forms of organizations and movements. It is important to recognize this trend and make the best of it. It is with this appreciation that organizations and agencies working with Dalit women can move forward for creating awareness among Dalit women about politics. However, while working with Dalit people in general or Dalit women in particular it is very much important to keep it in focus how state institutions and public policy can play significant role. For addressing such a strong and deep rooted system of structural segregation state has to come forward with its full support. Non governmental and civil society organizations should work along with state institutions. It is the strength of non governmental organizations that they can reach to the grassroots level and can mobilize the women in the margin. Their organizational capacity can bring in more effective result if they are supported by government.

With these concluding observations we can focus upon some ways that would make ground for increased participation of Dalit women.

Access and control over the resources should be ensured. Currently Dalits do not own any land or living place. This in turn reinforces their structural exclusion. By ensuring their entitlement to land and housing they can be provided with basic ground for belongingness – their alienation can thus be eliminated significantly. Thus the community itself will find its connection with the society and state – in the process women of the community will also fell more confident to interact with the greater society. They will think themselves as citizens and exercise their agencies. This will encourage them to be more active and responsive to politics.

It is important to keep focus on the ways in which caste and work based segregation still shape most of the aspects of Dalit peoples lives. Measures taken to lessen the rigour of the system would create channels for men and women to move beyond the ‘enclave’ within which they are currently captive.

Enhancement of education and diversification of professions will contribute significantly in challenging the structural constraints. The hope of freedom from caste based social exclusion can be realized in the process.

For expansion of education the system needs to culture sensitive and responsive to the specific situation of the community. Along with mainstream education there can be options of education that will use the languages of Dalits as medium of instruction and will work with a goal of gradual inclusion of Dalit children in the mainstream education system.

Particular focus should be given on how women can move beyond the traditional and stigmatized professions.

There is still plenty of scope for creating awareness among Dalit men and women as regards social, political and legal rights and entitlements. Nongovernmental and Civil Society organizations as well as women's organizations can work to this end. It is of foremost importance that Dalit people find the self-belief that they also are capable human beings similar to their Bengali counterparts.

Creating public discourse among the dominant class as regards the existence, right-entitlement and exclusion of these 'untouchable' people would create an environment of mutual understanding in which Dalit women would feel more encouraged to get engaged with the issues of collective interest.

Addressing gender discrimination at community and household level would be possible if women can achieve better position in terms of earning, education and political awareness. They will then make their presence felt and voice heard in sessions of *panchayat* as well in other formal and informal social-legal systems. Legal institutions and law enforcing agencies also need to be sensitized in this regard.

Removing the causes of insecurity would encourage Dalit women to move beyond community. For this the causes of physical abuse and sexual harassment from within and outside community should be addressed by the community as well as state and greater society. Factors should be taken into consideration as to why the victims don't go for accessing existing institutions. Women's organizations and political parties should take special interest about such experiences of Dalit women.

Those Dalit women who are playing strong role despite all these odds should be encouraged to play further role for inspiring other women in the community – particularly the younger generation. Moreover, there should be scope for Dalit women to network and lobby with the state institutions as well as international or global agencies and organizations.

Internal segregation among the Dalits has significant bearing on the possibility of collective movements. Dalits – both men and women – should be encouraged to work for overcoming such differences.

References

To be added ...

[Photographs are added in different file]