

Seeds of hope have been sewn for a better future for Dalits in Bangladesh. While many obstacles remain for Dalits in Bangladesh in terms of political participation, living standards, access to education and basic services and other rights, the Dalit movement in Bangladesh is growing strong and mobilising – giving a new generation of Dalits a reason to believe that things are changing. Photo: Abir Abdullah/EPA.

especially following key events. There has also been a fair level of international media attention particularly to the issues of bonded labour and education as well as the passing of the untouchability bill. To mention a few, the LA Times, The Guardian, and The BBC, have all published articles on the issue and ABC radio and MediaGlobal also interviewed IDS and UN officials on caste discrimination in Nepal.

Over the past years the Dalit movement has grown stronger and stronger and it was a difficult time for all partners in Nepal and around the world, when the young Dalit leader, Suvash Darnal, co-founder of JMC and founder of the Samata Foundation, passed away in a traffic accident. Several moving tributes were written and the Open Society Institute published a memorial stating, "Suvash's vision of a just and inclusive Nepal for all of its diverse peoples will not die with him. On the contrary, his short but fruitful life will surely serve as an example to all Nepalis working to build that bright, new Nepal that Suvash always knew was close and within reach." The activities and achievements in 2011, are a testament to this.

Bangladesh

Political lobbying, social mobilisation and networking continued to drive the Dalit movement in Bangladesh forward in 2011. Alongside other Dalit rights movements in Bangladesh, The Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), has empowered Dalits to start asserting their rights and inspired and pressured politicians and officials to take notice and make changes.

The impressive accomplishments of the movement were published in 2011 in the form of a 2008-2011 Work Statement from BDERM³⁷ including background information, goals, activities, documentation, priorities and actions for 2012.

BDERM furthermore published *Dalit Women in Bangladesh - Multiple Exclusions*³⁸ and together with NGO One World Action published a booklet documenting Dalit lives in Bangladesh entitled *Dalit rights are human rights*³⁹ depicting the Dalit struggle for dignity in Bangladesh. A print version of the publication was co-sponsored by IDS.

To further its spread of information and advocacy reach BDERM also launched a website on bderm.org including news, events, publications and information on the movement. The member base of the movement is continuing to grow steadily and BDERM has members throughout Bangladesh. A regular newsletter in Bangla was also disseminated in 2011.

Now we have leadership, skills, rights and dignity

Mukul Shikder, Chairperson, & Bothanki Solomon General Secretary, BDERM, in the foreword to the *Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement Work Statement: April 2008 – June 2011*

Over the past few years the Dalit movement in Bangladesh has gone from strength to strength, and is now a growing and effective force for positive change ... Until very recently, the existence of Dalits and caste discrimination in Bangladesh was denied, and now we see the issue being seriously addressed by both national and international policy makers and practitioners.

Attitudes amongst Dalit communities are slowly transforming, and for the first time in their history people are speaking out and not hiding their identity. As a direct result of our lobbying, Dalits and excluded communities are now included within the national Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper; in the recent election manifestos of all major political parties and in the priorities of the European Commission and other major donors.

A strong national movement has been established, combining community organising with public awareness raising and campaigning, lobbying, legal interventions and international advocacy.

Despite entrenched patterns of discrimination and extreme poverty, a new generation of courageous Dalit leaders and activists are starting to organise their communities and demand justice. What we thought would take generations has started to change in just a few years. We would like to take this opportunity to thank our partners and friends and to encourage your continued support so we can work together to end caste discrimination and untouchability practices in Bangladesh.

Although the Dalit movement has been very successful at raising awareness of Dalit rights in Bangladesh and mobilizing for political change, much work remains to be done as Dalits of Bangladesh are still generally repressed and their living standards incredibly low.

One of the key obstacles to progress that has been identified is that there is a lack of political leadership from the Dalit community and that other political leaders are not focused on Dalit rights. In the last parliamentary election, eight political parties in Bangladesh declared their commitment to developing the Dalit and excluded



communities, but unfortunately no special measures were enacted to follow up on this commitment. Although the constitution prohibits discrimination based on caste, the Untouchability ridden mindset of those implementing government programmes such as the social safety-net programme, continues to hamper Dalit access to this kind of support.

The Dalit movement in Bangladesh lobbied for political action to change this reality in 2011, through organising meetings with MPs, Ministers and relevant commissions to request quotas, a specific law against Untouchability and more priority to be given to the issue. BDERM also lobbied for the specific allocation of funds in the national budget to develop housing facilities for Dalit communities, and the Finance ministry responded by making Dalit specific allocations in the 2011-2012 budgets. The Chairman of the National Human Rights Commission also urged the Government to protect Dalits in a 2011 statement.

Housing for Dalits continued to be a central issue and the Dalit movement lobbied for building new houses and ensuring water and sanitation in Dalit communities through public marches, and mobilizing national level media. This work has already yielded results as authorities have started work for water supply, sanitation and road construction

in the Rainkhola Community in Dhaka and set up a water pump at Gabtali sweepers colony.

Cases of unlawful eviction of Dalit families were also taken up by Dalit human rights defenders and when a Dalit family in Dhaka was evicted from their homes by local land grabbers BDERM immediately investigated and compiled reports that were then followed up by the National Human Rights Commission and District Administrator. After the intervention the family resettled at their own land.

BDERM and other organisations in Bangladesh working for Dalit rights also organised a number of seminars to highlight the issue and inform about how to take action to ensure these rights in Bangladesh. One of these seminars took place as part of the South Asia Social Forum in Dhaka. BDERM furthermore organized a four day programme to highlight Dalit Rights including a colourful rally and human chain to mark International Human Rights Day, a Photo exhibition entitled "The Struggle of Dalits" and the BDERM Annual Council Meeting.

The Bangladesh Dalit Rights Parishad also organised several events to highlight Dalit rights throughout the year and in December 2011 the Manusher Jonno Foundation organised a three day long South-Asian Dalit Conference, bringing



together Dalits from across the region to discuss Dalit Rights.

Social mobilisation continues to be a key tool for the work of the Dalit movement in Bangladesh and campaigns including rallies and human chains with thousands of participants were organised in connection with the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, International Human Rights Day, World Dignity Day and in connection with specific cases of unlawful evictions and rights abuses.

Following a march against a specific case of untouchability, a dalit leader spearheading the protest, Ujjol Das, chairman of a local Bangladesh Dalit Parishad branch, was arrested by the Police on false charges and sent to jail together with his father and grandfather. The Bangladesh Dalit Parishad are pursuing a case against the police on the false charges launched against the Dalit human rights defenders.

Several press conferences were organised to highlight Dalit rights and the activities taking place and national level press continued to cover the Dalit struggle for rights in Bangladesh throughout 2011.

The Bangladesh movement also continued to engage in the global struggle for Dalit rights at regional and international level. BDERM representatives participated in the *Decade of Dalit Rights UN* conference in Geneva in June 2011 where BDERM was a co-organizer, and a new dalit woman leader, Sonu Rani Das, participated in the Fourth Session of the UN Forum on Minority Issues.

Representatives of BDERM also participated in the Nepal Dalit Women Conference in May 2011 and other IDSN events. BDERM submitted several good practice cases on mobilization, building Dalit woman leadership and campaigning for housing rights ahead of the IDSN International Consultation and Tamanna Sing Baraik of the Dalit women Forum presented a compelling case on tea workers in Bangladesh, who are predominantly Dalit.

Pakistan

The Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN) has been instrumental in raising public awareness of caste discrimination in Pakistan in 2011 and creating a stir in the media. Media reports on caste discrimination have included issues such as bonded labour, untouchability, kidnapping and forced conversions of Dalits. Media have also reported