

Bangladesh Dalit and excluded rights movement

The Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) was established as a national platform for Dalits in the beginning of 2008. It faces a number of challenges in asserting Dalit rights, including such key issues as various forms of discrimination against Dalit women, i.e. forced prostitution and bonded labour. Extremely limited access to health care, employment and education continues to dominate the lives of the Dalit 'colonies' in Bangladesh.

Nevertheless, the movement is growing steadily, and Dalits are gaining more footing and confidence at various levels. Because of BDERM activities, local Dalit groups have become very active in asserting their rights. They have formed human chains to protest against human rights violations of Dalits – including the rape of a Dalit girl in Jessore in July.

The movement organised the first ever Dalit Human Rights Conference in Bangladesh in Dhaka in January. Approximately 300 Dalit representatives from 47 districts attended the event, and a wide range of topics related to Dalit rights were presented and discussed.

In preparation of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) of Bangladesh, 17 organisations formed a network called the Human Rights Forum on UPR. BDERM was one of the key members of this forum. A shadow report on the human rights situation of Dalits were prepared together with Nagoryik Uddyog and IDSN, and BDERM representatives attended the UPR session during the UN Human Rights Council in February 2009. As a follow-up to the review, a press briefing was organised in Dhaka in June 2009 where a BDERM representative raised the Dalit issue. The briefing was attended by the Foreign Minister who gave specific attention to this problem in her speech, although the issue was not raised in the UPR debate and recommendations that were approved by the Human Rights Council.

tipakir kailal, Nepal, November 2007 Bahadur Lohar, a Dalit, was born to become a blacksmith.

He serves ten families and is paid once a year. The caste system has locked his family into a pattern of bonded labour for generations. Nepal's Dalits are now making demands for a more inclusive constitution.

To advocate for adequate living conditions and housing rights for Dalits, BDERM organised a national level seminar in March entitled 'Housing Rights of Dalits and special allocation national budget 2009-10 to build more houses/colonies for Dalits'. A Charter of Demands was sent to the Finance Minister, who said in his budget speech: "We believe in harmony among the different religions, castes, groups and communities. We want the end of differential treatment and oppression of minority population. We will guarantee political, administrative, legal and social security for them."

Other issues were also raised by BDERM, including the right to an adequate standard of health, access to water and sanitation, and quotas in educational institutions. The Government responded positively in some cases. For example, it started to build 60 apartments for the Dalit community. The Law Ministry has also showed an interest in drafting a law against discrimination. An increased advocacy capacity would enable BDERM to direct more of its lobbying efforts at government officials.

BDERM successfully organised an event to mark the International Day against Racial Discrimination in March 2009. This event contributed to raising further awareness of caste discrimination. BDERM also organised series of events countrywide on International Human Rights Day and the World Dignity Day in December. 10,000 leaflets and 5000 posters were printed to raise awareness, and approximately 2000 Dalits attended the events.

In terms of international advocacy, BDERM and Nagorik Uddyog (a supporting organisation to BDERM) facilitated a number of events and visits in 2009. An international consultation on caste discrimination was held in Dhaka in June in connection with a regional seminar held by the EU (read more on page 11). Two UN Independent Experts visited a Dalit colony as part of their joint field visit to Bangladesh in December (read more on page 9).

Human chain against land grabbing

Land grabbing is one of the serious problems facing the Dalit community in Bangladesh. On 29 March a group of people tried to evict Dalit inhabitants of 11 houses in Dhaka city, and demolished a temple. To protest the local land grabbers, BDERM organised a series of activities, including the formation of a human chain, and held a press conference and coordination meeting with other human rights organisations and victims between March and June. Finally the perpetrators decided to quit the land grabbing from the Dalit colony.

Dhaka, Bangladesh, September 2007 Dalit sweepers contribute to Dhaka's production of public goods, but get very few goods or services in return. They even struggle to hold on to these underpaid and low regarded jobs. The Dalit movement in Bangladesh is now growing in confidence.

"They [Dalits of Bangladesh] are reportedly denied education because of social stigma, and their jobs are threatened. Although they work in sanitation all day long, they have no or inadequate access to water and sanitation in their own homes. The government must end all forms of discrimination and adopt immediate measures to guarantee their human rights." Statement by the two UN Independent Experts on water and sanitation and on extreme poverty after their visit to a Dalit colony in Dhaka, Bangladesh, 10 December

BDERM held its first General Council in Dhaka in October with participation from 50 of the country's 64 districts. The Council adopted its constitution as amended, and approved the annual work plan. It also decided that Nagorik Uddyog will work as secretariat for the next two years of BDERM to support its activities and provide advice. BDERM organised two consultation meetings at divisional level in June and July in Chittagong and Sylhet respectively. Approximately 155 Dalit representatives participated in the meetings, and were joined by tea plantation workers. BDERM issues a quarterly newsletter Dalit O Bonchito Shamchar which has approximately 1500 active readers.