

Bangladesh

Politically, economically, socially and culturally, Dalits are one of the most excluded minority groups in Bangladesh. In 2012, the country's Dalit movement continued to campaign for the rights of Dalits and other socially excluded people. The Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) and other organisations lobbied the Government for changes in legislation as well as increased budget allocations for the country's estimated 5.5 million Dalits.

A few political leaders from mainstream parties became sensitive towards the Dalit issue, but political leadership from Dalit communities in the national political arena is still lacking. This is a main challenge for the Dalit rights movement in Bangladesh. So is the lack of unity in the Dalit community which makes it more difficult for it to raise its voice to the government and demand basic rights for Dalits.

Although the political parties were informed about Dalit development issues, they took no special initiatives in this area. The work of the Dalit movement has, however, led to some positive results, such as the agreement between the Law Commission of Bangladesh and the National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) to work for the enactment of a law for protecting Dalit rights in Bangladesh.

BDERM organised meetings with these two bodies as well as lawmakers and government officials to discuss a specific law against 'untouchability' and discrimination and secure an increased focus on Dalit rights issues. In early December, BDERM representatives met with the Foreign Ministry and discussed the Universal Periodic Review submission related to the Dalit rights situation. During this discussion, the relevant desk of the ministry agreed to include the Dalit issue in its UPR report.

This UPR submission was prepared jointly by BDERM, Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Women Federation (BDEWF), and Nagorik Uddyog (Citizen's Initiative) in association with IDSN. The report contains findings on the human rights situation of Dalits in Bangladesh and also follows up on the lack of implementation of existing UPR recommendations from the first review in 2009, with a particular focus on Dalits and other excluded groups. The human rights record of Bangladesh will be reviewed in April-May 2013.

For the past two years, the Government of Bangladesh has allocated funds for Dalits in the national budget. In the fiscal year 2012-13, the amount was BDT 146.1 million (appr. 1,378,000 Euros) to be spent on social safety net programmes for Dalit and other socially excluded communities. In the previous year, the government allocated BDT 100 million for housing development for Dalits. BDERM had previously submitted a memorandum to the Finance Ministry demanding a specific allocation in the national budget to develop housing, sanitation and safe water facilities for Dalit communities.

These budget allocations are positive steps, but the amounts are very small for such a large community. Dalits are a very long way from fully enjoying the most fundamental human rights. Key challenges include lack of access to education; extreme poverty issues; health and housing problems; and unequal access to work. There is still a serious need for producing disaggregated data on caste, and further research.

Dalit women are the worst affected. They suffer from multiple forms of discrimination and are yet to be empowered to take an active part in the socio-cultural, economic and political arena in the community and the country. The newly formed BDEWF has formulated a list of demands, including the need for ensuring basic health services, scholarships for students, social safety-net programmes, and political inclusion of Dalit women at local and national level. Jahangirnagar University in Dhaka provided a special admission facility for four Dalit students. This step came as a response to a BDERM memorandum to the university's Vice-Chancellor, demanding a special

admission quota for Dalit students. Most Dalits have no formal education and only few make it to the higher education institutions.

As in previous years, campaigning formed an important part of BDERM's activities. Human chains and rallies were organised on numerous occasions, including International Women's Day (8 March), the International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (21 March) and Human Rights Day (10 December). Dalits also demonstrated for budget allocations and a specific law against 'untouchability'.

BDERM also organised a number of seminars together with the NGO Nagorik Uddyog – one on the role of the state in ensuring the right of socially excluded people, including Dalits, and another on budget and development issues. BDERM also teamed up with BDEWF for a seminar on social justice and the vulnerability of Dalits.

At a South Asian regional consultation in Dhaka on 1-2 December, campaigners for Dalit rights from the region and beyond as well as researchers discussed special legislation to ensure equal rights for Dalits and other excluded communities in Bangladesh. It was at this event that the Acting Chair of the Law Commission, Dr Shah Alam, announced the decision to work with NHRC on a set of recommendations to the government on a law against 'untouchability'. The consultation also made recommendations on the development of a national action plan, taking guidance from UN human rights frameworks and experience from other countries in the region.

BDERM participated in numerous other networking activities, including a gathering of development workers and a workshop on the draft UPR report. BDERM leader Sonu Rani Das participated in the 21st Session of the UN Human Rights Council in Geneva. This session gave her an opportunity to discuss the situation and challenges of the Dalit communities in Bangladesh.

On a local and district level, there was a flurry of activities. Advocacy meetings took place, involving local government officials. BDERM partner organisations organised 79 awareness meetings in a number of towns and cities and provided skill training. BDERM also organised training programmes for Dalit leaders, activists, women and students.

The government of Bangladesh should be encouraged to enact a law against discriminatory practices and recognise them as a criminal offence. It would also be important to establish quota systems for Dalits in all public educational institutes, and promote adequate employment opportunities for Dalits in all sectors of the economy. UNDP Country Director Mr Stefan Priesner on International Human Rights Day, 10 December

BDERM continued to reach out the country's media outlets. On 7 July, staff from daily newspapers and electronic media took part in a dialogue meeting on 'Dalit Rights Movement: Success, Way Forward and the Role of Journalists'. At this event, BDERM leaders discussed the overall situation of Dalits in Bangladesh and the struggle for their rights. The journalists also made suggestions on how to move forward to the Dalit rights movement.

The movement continued publishing its newsletter which was distributed to Dalit communities, development organisations, human rights activists, educators and policy makers. The organisation also published campaign posters and a calendar and posted regular updates on its website.