

Bangladesh

In the context of violent political unrest and a sharply deteriorating human rights environment, the Dalit movement in Bangladesh continued its difficult struggle for the rights of the estimated 6.5 million Dalits, one of the country's most marginalised and impoverished communities.

Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) is one of the main groups promoting Dalit human rights. In 2013, it mainly focused on lobby and advocacy work with relevant stakeholders – e.g. relevant government departments and ministries, The National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) and the Law Commission of Bangladesh – in order to secure the enactment of specific legislation against caste discrimination.

Progress was made, as the NHRC and the Law Commission are now jointly working on a law against discrimination and untouchability practices. BDERM had numerous meetings with these two bodies in 2013, and submitted suggestions for a draft 'Anti-Discrimination Act' to the Law Commission on 26 October.

In the Universal Periodic Review session in April, the Foreign Minister of Bangladesh referred to the Dalit issue during her presentation of the human rights situation report on Bangladesh. But the Government of Bangladesh only partly accepted the specific recommendations of two UN member states to address the Dalit human rights issue.

BDERM continued to lobby parliamentarians. On 9 September, six parliamentarians participated in a consultation on caste discrimination and committed to promote Dalit rights. A further 25 expressed their solidarity in writing or over the phone. Following this consultation, parliamentarians from Bangladesh, India and Nepal took part in the regional parliamentarians' conference in Kathmandu, Nepal, on 8-9 December. The conference led to the formation of a platform named the 'South Asian Parliamentarians' Forum'.

Apart from the generally serious political situation in the country, many other challenges remain for the Dalit human rights movement. These include a lack of political leadership. There are no Dalit representatives in the national parliament, so issues concerning the country's Dalit community are not on the agenda. Though the Government has allocated some funds in the national budget in last three years, these funds are inadequate to meet the needs of the Dalit community.

For the fiscal year 2013-2014, the Government allocated 123.0 million Taka (appr. 1.16 million Euro) for the social welfare of Dalit communities. The Ministry responsible for implementing the programme ensured BDERM participation in the planning meeting and district level implementation committees. While some development agencies (NGOs) are increasingly allocating development projects for Dalit communities, a collective voice of the different stakeholders for their basic rights is yet to emerge.

BDERM has submitted a memorandum to the Vice-Chancellors of 12 Public Universities demanding special admission quotas for Dalit students. Dhaka University authority gave a special admission facility for Dalit students in the academic year 2013-14. In 2012-2013, Jahangirnagar University gave a special admission facility for five Dalit students in a direct response to BDERM lobbying.

As part of its campaign work, BDERM organised human chains and rallies on the International Day for the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (21 March) in 27 districts across the country. This campaign helped to create mass awareness of Dalit Human Rights in Bangladesh. BDERM also observed World Dignity Day (5 December) and International Human Rights Day (10 December) in 30 districts across the country.

On 13 December, a media consultation took place in Dhaka. The topic of the consultation was "Dalit Peoples' Poor Socio-economic Condition and Development Crisis". The BDERM leaders focused on the deprived social and economic condition of the Dalit community. The consultation made civil society representatives and journalists

more aware about the real conditions of the Dalit community, and they committed to raise their voice for the advancement of the community.

BDERM organised numerous seminars with different partners, including the NGO Nagorik Uddyog, the NHCR and the Law Commission. On 3 February, the two commissions organised a seminar on “Legal Protection to implement Citizen’ Rights of Dalit as Marginal Community” with BDERM as co-organiser. A total of 250 Dalit representatives attended the event. The following month, BDERM leaders spoke at a national consultation on “Equal Opportunities for all: Towards an Anti-discrimination Legislation”. On 11 May, political activists, civil society representatives and Dalit leaders spoke at a seminar on the issue of special allocations for Dalits in the national budget.

BDERM representatives attended the UPR session on Bangladesh in Geneva on 29 April. A series of lobby meetings were also organised with diplomats in different states and a Bangladeshi diplomat in Geneva before the actual session. After the review, BDERM, as member of Human Rights Forum Bangladesh (a coalition of 19 human rights and development organizations), organised a daylong seminar on the Universal Periodic Review (UPR). The main objective of the seminar was to push the Government for more specific and time-bound commitments and to get acceptance for the pending recommendations (two on the Dalit issue) in the final plenary session in September 2013.

BDERM representatives Sonu Rani Das and Tamana Sing Baraik participated in the 23rd Session of UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland. This session gave them the opportunities to discuss the situation and challenges of the Dalit communities in Bangladesh.

In 2013 BDERM organised 23 district meetings and formed BDERM district committees. BDERM also organised seven divisional meetings in Barisal, Khulna, Dinajpur, Moulvibazar (Shylet), Rangpur, Rajshahi and Chittagong in this year. Divisional level government officers, City Corporation Mayors, civil society members and local Dalit representatives participated in those divisional meetings and spoke on the Dalit issue.

Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Women Federation (BDEWF) – a national platform of Dalit women led organisations – organised the 2nd Dalit women rights conference on 14 December. About 200 Dalit women participated in this conference from across the country.

BDERM also organised training programmes for Dalit leaders, activists and Dalit women. The participants received training on leadership and individual organisational development.

BDERM has also been working through its partner organisations. They organised 89 rights-based awareness meetings in Dhaka, Narayanganj, Moulvibazar, Jessore and Barisal among their community. They are also running 10 informal schools in these areas. Moreover, these organisations provide skills training – such as sewing, bloc-boutique, professional driving etc. Building a strong network among those organisations will make BDERM a bigger movement.

BDERM continued publishing its newsletter covering community news and its own activities. It also published a book on “Dalit Initiatives in Bangladesh” as well as posters and calendars.