

## Highlights on Book Release Ceremony on: **“Caste based Discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Bangladesh”**

The Book Release ceremony on the books titled “Caste based Discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Bangladesh” in English and also its translation in Bengali “Dakkhin Asiai Jati-Barna Baishaymma: Pariprekkhit Bangladesh” was held in Pitstop Hall, Chittagong, Bangladesh on June 6, 2009. Based on the study as sponsored, edited and supported by Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS)/International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) and written by Dr. Iftekhar Uddin Chowdhury, Professor and former Chair of Sociology, University of Chittagong, the books were published by Center for Social Research, Chittagong, Bangladesh.

Dr. Afsarul Amin, Minister of Port and Shipping, Government of Bangladesh was the chief guest in the occasion. In his chief guest’s speech, he said that survey based research findings of the study of Dr. Iftekhar Chowdhury gives very relevant, important and meaningful information which we must not listen only to, but must be active to take necessary steps to promote voices against these acute discrimination and effective action for its elimination. He said, my neighbors are mostly fisherfolk and I personally have been experiencing their miseries and pains from my early childhood. We know about the Hindu caste divisions, but came to know for the first about Muslim Dalits with such nature and extent of discrimination along with Hindu Dalits. Dr. Iftekhar Chowdhury, supported by the sponsors for this study opened our eyes genuinely not to ignore but to address the issues from a positive viewpoint, so that we can claim a society for all with established rights and obligations, he said. He highly praised the study and thanked to Dr. Iftekhar Chowdhury and the sponsors for this detailed study, which he hopes will pave ways for future researchers. He urged upon all concerns – state, political parties and all social forces to come forward and create united voice and action in favor of Dalits and government to sponsor such research in future.

Eminent sociologist of this sub-continent Prof. Dr. Anupam Sen (former Chair of Sociology and Dean of Social Sciences Faculty, University of Chittagong) Honorable Vice Chancellor, Premier University, Chittagong has presided over the book launching ceremony. In his speech, he claimed that Dr. Iftekhar Chowdhury’s this study is the pioneer to identify the nature and assess the extent of discrimination of Dalits in Bangladesh. Sociologists like Prof. Nazmul Karim and others gave us some description on divisions of Muslims, but they could not identify the detailed nature and extent of Muslim dalits as Dr. Iftekhar did. He cited many examples from Tagore’s poems and others to make his statement on Dalits/caste discrimination and wished his student Dr. Iftekhar to be more active to undertake such research and every success in his academic career. Chittagong City Mayor Alhaj A.B.M. Mohiuddin Chowdhury was supposed to be the special guest. He could not attend the ceremony as he had to attend a very urgent and important meeting suddenly scheduled in Dhaka, but he sent a message in writing wishing the ceremony a grand success and well dissemination of the books while he made an appeal to all concerns to be united more effectively for raising voice against all those discrimination as identified and explained in the research and books of Dr. Iftekhar Chowdhury, so that the history of this kind of discrimination should not be prolonged. Ruling Party lawmaker Mr. Abul Kashem, honorable Member of Parliament was the special guest who attended and spoke in the occasion. He highly appreciated the efforts of Prof. Iftekhar Chowdhury to undertake such research and publish books, which according to him will really help the all concerns including lawmakers to have a clear conception about the nature and extent of discrimination faced by the Dalits in the country. He said, since we are elected by those people majority of whom are Dalits and are discriminated in such a way as portrayed in the books, we must ensure that Dalits’

rights are properly established in all spheres of life and active/effective measures must be taken by the respective authority to eliminate all the constraints responsible for such discrimination. Other panel special guest Prof. Dr. Abu Yousuf, honorable Vice Chancellor of University of Chittagong who was very keen and expressed his sincere interest to attend the ceremony, but He could not attend due to time constraint of the launching and his sudden/urgent meetings in the university. He also wished the book launching over telephone.

After power point presentation on the major findings of the books by Prof. Iftekhar Chowdhury, all the panel discussants spoke in the occasion and focused many experiences related to the findings. Mr. Arun Das Gupta, Poet, intellectual and Senior Assistant Editor of Daily Azadi mentioned that he was indeed rather confused about the issues of Dalits and argued on many occasion even in Chennai conference that there has not been such matters related to Dalits in Bangladesh. He expressed, he is so much grateful to Prof. Iftekhar that Dr. Iftekhar fingered out the nature and extent of such discrimination based on survey findings which now make me believe that discriminations exist and it is every spheres in life of Dalits of both Hindu and Muslims. Belonging to Hindu upper caste, we just overlooked the issues and thought that all as usual. At this age about 70, Dr. Iftekhar gave me a right tract to understand the issues and break my mistake, for which I must congratulate Dr. Iftekhar and the sponsors for the study and again submit my gratitude to him for creating opportunity for us to know and understand such matters in a very professional way for the first time in my life.

Dr. Farid Uddin Ahmad, Professor and former Chair of Anthropology, University of Chittagong also highly appreciated the effort of Dr. Iftekhar and requested him to organize some other academic sessions in future to go and discuss in deep about the theoretical and conceptual issues regarding Dalits. He mentioned that this kind of detailed study about the nature and extent of discrimination is for the first time in Bangladesh. According to Dr. Farid, the use of terminology “Dalit” to denote and include all the discriminated/degraded/untouchables of different religious groups under one identity is really unique and this kind of categorization in a professional way is also for the first time in Bangladesh especially in academic arena. He seriously criticized the so-called NGO traders/researchers for large number of whom according to him, academic research/survey in the grass roots level has become very difficult as most participants/target population (are reluctant to face interview or give data/information as they are all tired and bored with these activities) in entire rural-urban Bangladesh are the victims of NGO researchers/activists with hundreds of commitments for improving their livelihood without doing nothing for the targets but only serve their own interest in terms of getting high salary/other benefits along with traveling all over the world in the name of so called seminar/workshop/conferences.

Dr. Khurshid Alam, Executive Director of CODEC (NGO working with fisherfolk communities funded by Danida for more than two decades) and Development Researcher took part in the discussion and highly praised the study. He opined that the case studies are really the heart of such study and it would have been better if Dr. Iftekhar could elaborate the cases with more examples of pains and pleasure along with success stories of the cases if they have any in any matters. He also said that Dr. Iftekhar could make a way open for the researchers with the Dalits in future with more dimensions and new issues.

Eminent lawyer and strong voice of human rights, Mr. Rana Das Gupta also highly appreciated the study and shared most of the issues. He said, issues are quite relevant, consistent and familiar as they are experiencing such invisible matters everyday in life, but Dr. Iftekhar is bold to undertake

such research and make everything visible in data and figures which will lead a long way for human rights researchers and activists. He quoted many issues and figures from the study and endorsed his positive opinion in terms of findings. He wished that Dr. Iftekhar go further with the issues of atrocity in detail and wide dissemination of the study.

Women leader and civil society representative Mrs. Jesmine Sultana Paru also took part in the discussion and endorsed the relevancy of the data and findings, which she said, will definitely encourage other researchers to go ahead with such study for Dalits. She said, she also donated few sewing machines in Bandel Sweeper Colony in Chittagong to help Dalit women to look for other profession. She wished Dr. Iftekhar and his efforts and much more success in future.

Md. Nazim Uddin  
Coordinator  
CSR, Chittagong