

Dalits of Bangladesh:

Destined to a life of humiliation

IDSN

International Dalit Solidarity Network

A User's Manual to a Life of Degradation

Most children are born with a sense of possibility. Even the poor have the right to dream of a life that's better than their parents' – or at least different from it. But in the case of Bangladesh's Dalits, such dreams would amount to pure fantasy. If your father is a sweeper, you are likely to become a sweeper too. The sons of barbers are barbers; the cobblers will see their children grow up as cobblers.

So, what is wrong with "job security" and inheritance of skills in a poor country with limited access to education? The problem is the attached status as "untouchable" in the eyes of the majority of the population. As a Dalit, you are equipped with a user's manual to a life of daily humiliation.

You will be told where to live and which playgrounds, tea shops and burial grounds you can and cannot use. The manual dictates which houses you are not supposed to enter to greet the mother of a newborn baby or a couple on their wedding day. You will be acutely aware that many toilets are inaccessible for you – and for your children at their schools. And if you should meet a non-Dalit at the local market, you might be instructed to carry her shopping bags home. The Dalits' manual to life even defines the appropriate distance to keep at a funeral of somebody you might have known your entire life, but whose "higher status" will prevent you from staying more than a few minutes to offer your condolences.

Both the Muslim majority and Hindu minority in Bangladesh have a hierarchical caste system with discrimination, exclusion and practices of untouchability against "the lower castes". The estimates of their numbers vary from 3,5 to 5,5 million.

Of course, this user's manual doesn't exist in writing. It doesn't have to. The rules governing the daily humiliations of Dalits are so inherent that both the oppressor and the oppressed know them instinctively. But, as a first step to combating discrimination, these practices have now been documented, in detail, by Bangladeshi researchers in a unique study for the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in association with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN).

The study reveals a pattern of descent and work-based discrimination so widespread that it is rarely questioned by the practitioners and is *de facto* sanctioned by the State. The constitution's ban on discrimination is not enforced; discriminatory practices are still in place in a number of government run institutions.

At a time when Bangladesh is busy positioning itself in the global economy, internationally condemned practices such as child labour are rampant and often fuelled by caste-based discrimination. This is not just problematic for the poor but for the future of an entire nation.

Two Religions, Similar Problems

Caste systems and discrimination against so-called "untouchables" are traditionally regarded as part of Hindu culture and certainly originate in Hindu scriptures; but in Bangladesh, these traditions and practices have also been adopted by the Muslim majority. In addition, an unknown number of Christian Dalits live in Bangladesh.

Members of these "low castes" have been known by terms such as "untouchables" and "scheduled castes". However, they increasingly refer to themselves as Dalits — "broken people" — to emphasise the fact that they have been deliberately exploited, oppressed and destroyed through generations.

Since ancient times, they have held jobs such as fishermen, sweepers, barbers, washers, dyers, blacksmiths, goldsmiths, cobblers, oil-pressers, boatmen, weavers, hunters, sawyers, butchers, gardeners, tailors and drum beaters. These are all important positions for the functioning of any society but they are widely regarded as menial.

Hindu and Muslim Dalits share a number of problems and challenges but also differ in some respects. The Hindus suffer double discrimination as members of a religious minority in the Muslim nation as well as because of low status within their own communities.

A Regional Study

This fact sheet and the underlying study of Bangladesh's Dalits are part of a regional study on caste-based discrimination undertaken by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in association with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN).

The regional research covers four countries; Nepal, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. The landmark reports are available at www.idsn.org and www.dalitstudies.org.in

The Bangladesh study's main findings are highlighted on the following pages in the "Challenges and Recommendations" sections.



A moment of play and laughter in the Pangu PWD Sweeper Colony in the Agargoan district of Dhaka. In the rainy season he better cling on to the stilts the colony is built on – bad sanitation and flooding in the colony brings diseases deadly for Dalit children like him.

Discrimination based on religion includes the State’s attempt – through its discriminatory laws – over many years to strip the Hindu community of its land as well as attacks and abuse by radical Muslims.

But, when it comes to discrimination based on work and descent, the Hindu Dalits generally suffer the most. Nevertheless, the IIDS study does reveal a number of areas in which Muslim Dalits experience more severe discrimination than their Hindu counterparts – most notably in school. This seems caused by the fact that, whereas the Hindu Dalits normally attend schools built specifically for their communities, the children of Muslim Dalits are more likely to join non-Dalits in their education. Discrimination in relation to salaries is another area where Muslim Dalits report greater discrimination than Hindu Dalits.

Survival is a Balancing Act

The Sweeper Colony in the Agargoan area of Dhaka is built on stilts: the 98 minute shacks are connected by walkways of slippery bamboo poles to keep their 500 inhabitants above the frequent flood waters of the area. Pragmatic measures are the order of the day here. Much the same can be said about the social system that created this nightmare of a neighbourhood and keeps it alive.

The sweepers in Dhaka are typically descendants of Hindus imported from present-day India by the former British colonial masters in order to do menial work. The Sweeper Colony is evidence that Bangladesh’s independence did not effect much change in this regard. Some of the inhabitants are employed by the same Public Works Department that established the colony but never supplied it with safe water and electricity.

64%

Proportion of Hindu Dalits who have no education at all. The figure for Muslim Dalits is 61%.
(IIDS study with 250 respondents, 2007)

70,9%

Proportion of Hindu Dalits whose families have lived in the same location for more than 30 years. For many of them housing is closely related to their professions – and often they are not allowed to live elsewhere.

The corresponding figure for the more mobile Muslim Dalits is 49,4%.

(IIDS study with 250 respondents, 2007)

The close correlation between employment, housing and identity often prevents Dalits from improving their status. In Bangladesh, one of the most densely populated countries in the world, even the cholera infested Sweeper Colony is seen as a valuable foothold in the capital. The shack comes with the job, and the sweepers thus find it hard to imagine or establish any other career for themselves and their children. As “untouchables”, Dalits are in any case rarely allowed to rent or build houses in the “pure” areas elsewhere.

The study by IIDS documents how Dalits have been conditioned to accept this system. Acceptance has been perpetuated to such an extent that only a minority regards the lack of access to other work as discrimination.

The study also reveals that the sons of Dalits very often inherit the profession of their father. This affects their level of education – schooling and even literacy are not regarded as necessities in most of the tradi-

tional occupations of Dalits. Discrimination against Dalit children in schools puts a further damper on any ambitions of education. And experience tells the Dalit community that even the graduates among them will battle to find a job. This powerful combination of tradition, discrimination by society and the Dalits’ own acceptance of their fate as unavoidable leaves people balancing on bamboo poles above the muddy waters of unpredictability and possible progress.



Bangladesh
4,5 million or
3-4 percent of
the total population

Immaculately clean after a good scrub, yet regarded as "dirty" by the surrounding society. Dalits have been living in the Bilkana Dalit colony for 80 years under miserable conditions, but have little chance of moving to a better place due to strict segregation.

The Devil is in the Detail

Dalits in Bangladesh have limited access to most things – from clean water to electricity. The IIDS study reveals that only a minority enjoys even the simplest conveniences such as telephones (8,6% and 9,3% among Hindu and Muslim Dalits respectively), radios (10,3% and 8,0%) and bicycles (16,6% and 12,0%).

Yet the most striking feature of Dalits' existence is not the extreme poverty that they share with billions of people around the world. What makes the life of Dalits particularly unbearable are the practices of untouchability and the daily humiliation through caste-based discrimination. The IIDS study documents a number of these practices in painstaking detail.

Dalits are often prevented from entering the homes of non-Dalits – 29,2% of Hindus and 45,3% of Muslims report moderate to strong discrimination in this regard. Resistance only increases if they should ask to use the toilet; moderate to strong discrimination is experienced by 39,4% and 34,7% respectively. Dalit children are the victims of similar discrimination in the toilets of public schools.



Only 30% of the interviewed Hindu Dalits have never met resistance when wanting to enter a house to greet the mother of a newborn baby in the community: the corresponding figure for Muslims is 28%. Newly-wed couples are even more inaccessible to Dalits: only 9,7% Hindu and 22,7% Muslim Dalits have not experienced discrimination in their attempts to extend congratulations.

90,3%

Proportion of Hindu Dalits who have experienced resistance to marriage with other religions.

The corresponding figure for Muslim Dalits is 85,3%.

(IIDS study with 250 respondents, 2007)

46,3% and 70,7% of Hindu and Muslim Dalits respectively have had to carry plastic bags for non-Dalits whom they have met at the market. This is just one of the practices of dominance. Others include having Dalits touch the feet of non-Dalits with their foreheads — a degrading act that is particularly enjoyed by the intimidator when others are present to watch. And so the discrimination continues throughout life and even after death: 40,6% of Hindu and 53,7% of Muslim Dalits have met with discrimination at public graveyards when trying to bury members of their family.

Land Grabbed from Hindu “Enemies”

Some forms of discrimination against Hindu Dalits in Bangladesh are closely connected to the historically hostile relationship with neighbouring India and its Hindu rulers. The land laws are arguably the most poignant example.

The formation of Pakistan (divided in East and West Pakistan of which the former later became Bangladesh) in 1947 was based on the “Two Nation Theory” which regards Hindus and Muslims as two separate nations by every definition. Hostilities towards Hindus increased rapidly, and a large number fled to India. The government of Pakistan used the opportunity to take over so-called “evacuee property” in 1949, 1951 and 1957.

Subsequent legislation in this regard, including the Vested Property Act passed in 1974 by independent Bangladesh, all had one thing in common: it gave the State the right to confiscate any land from people who were deemed enemies of the state.

Since much of the Hindu minority’s land in Bangladesh was co-owned by alleged enemies in India, it was an easy target. Extensive research by Professor Abul Barakat of Dhaka University indicates that 925 050 Hindu households were affected and the community lost a total of 6 640 km² of land. It ended up in the hands of just 0,4% of the population, mostly powerful politicians among the ruling Muslims. As a consequence of this practice, an estimated 5,3 million Hindus emigrated between 1964 and 1991.

The increasingly controversial Act was finally repealed in 2001 and replaced by the Vested Properties Return Act. However, implementation of this law has been slow and opposition parties have called for its repeal.

Meanwhile, the spirit of the old Act lives on in widespread attacks on the Hindu population perpetrated by radical Muslims. As a consequence of the extensive confiscations and the delayed return of the land, landlessness is widespread. Lack of land often also means lack of access to credit and prevents Dalits from acquiring other capital assets such as decent housing. This problem is shared with Muslim Dalits even though they never had to face any of the discriminatory land acts.

53%

Proportion of the land owned by Bangladesh’s Hindus which was lost as a result of the Vested Property Act and similar legislation.

(Professor Abul Barakat, 1997 and also Gupta R.D., 2007)

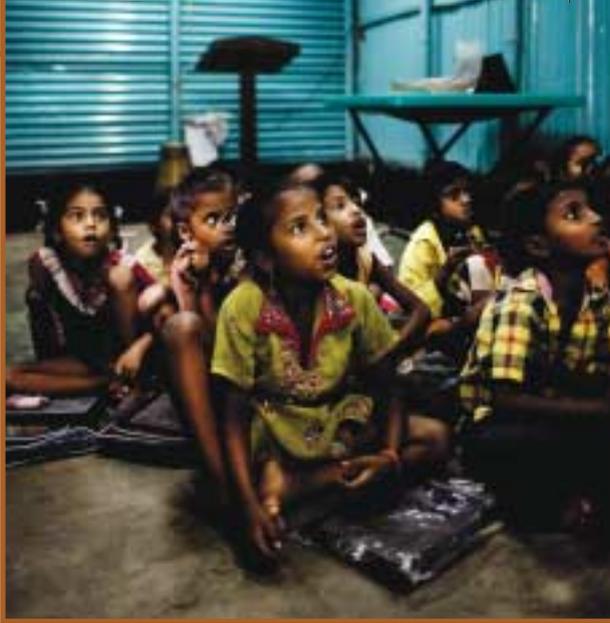


The Younger Face of Discrimination

Countries that are truly developing regard improvements in education as an important benchmark for success. In Bangladesh, however, the most noticeable trend is that more and more children go to work rather than to school. The last official count, done by the State in 1996, found 6,3 million child labourers between the ages of five and 14 years. This is the equivalent of 19% of the total child population.

A large number of these working children are Dalits for whom this development has alarming consequences. Instead of becoming the new generation with a better future through education, the children simply become the ever-younger faces of the old dynamics of caste-based discrimination.

There are many reasons for this. Poverty forces Dalit families to use any available means to increase the household income as fast as possible: investing in the future through education is seen as a luxury that a poor family cannot afford. Meanwhile employers in an increasingly competitive economy – locally as well as globally – welcome any chance to increase the workforce and decrease the salaries. Many see child labour as the answer. According to the Bangladesh Shishu Adhikar Forum, children do 430 different kinds of work of which 63 are hazardous. These include ship breaking, prostitution, collection of shrimp fries, working in brick kilns, slaughtering animals, smuggling and political violence.



Most Dalit children work and don't go to school. These children in Rainkhola Bangladesh Sanjaktā Harijōn Colony are lucky, but their situation may change in an instant. The Dalit community is struggling to avoid being forcibly removed from the area by the government.

The police suggest that between 15 000 and 20 000 children are engaged in street prostitution; an estimated 250 000-300 000 – mainly girls – are working as maids in Dhaka which could be considered to be forced labour. Other children are exported to the Middle East and used as jockeys in camel races.

Discrimination against Dalits in Bangladesh's schools is part of the reason that work is often regarded as more attractive than education. 81,7% of Hindu Dalits and 84% of Muslim Dalits in the

IIDS survey have experienced discrimination as early as at the time of admission to school. Once admitted, the pattern continues with Dalits reporting widespread discrimination from teachers as well as other students. Thus the old patterns of caste-based discrimination contribute to lowering the age of the new victims by pushing them into the labour market instead.

445 226

Number of street children in six cities in Bangladesh.

They are homeless orphans or abandoned and frequently exploited as forced or bonded labourers.

(Baseline survey by ARISE, 2001)

A Nation Shuns Its own Potential

Ideally, election campaigns should be a time of hope and an opportunity for politicians and voters to swap promises of a better future for support, all in mutual respect. For many Dalits of Bangladesh, however, elections are often synonymous with violence.

If Dalits participate in rallies for a particular candidate, they are frequently threatened or beaten after the election. Some are prevented from visiting the polling stations out of fear that they will vote for the "wrong" candidate. And, if someone should win an election without the support of non-Dalit Hindus, that person could face severe problems.

This is all reflected in the IIDS survey. 31,4% of Hindu Dalits and 50,7% of their Muslim counterparts feel discriminated against when participating in political activities. Not surprisingly, this leads to negligible representation of Dalits in all spheres of government.

82,3%

Proportion of Hindu Dalits who feel discriminated against by NGOs and their micro-credit programmes which are world-famous as pioneers in the fight against poverty. The proportion of Muslim Dalits with the same experience is 56%.

(IIDS study with 250 respondents, 2007)

This lack of willingness to let Dalits make their own choices and be heard in the political arena is only one symptom of a larger exclusion that amounts to missed opportunities, not just for the individual, but also for the State.

Particularly Hindu Dalits feel that they are not taken seriously, even when they have skills to offer to society. The stereotyping of Dalits as unable to perform more advanced jobs is perpetuated by the State. Hindu representation in the bureaucracy and among officers in the army (1,6%) and the police (6%) is way below their 20% proportion of the population.

The negative attitude towards Dalits even spills over into the micro-credit programs that have made Bangladesh world famous as a pioneer in the fight against poverty. Dalits are less relied on as debtors because most of them don't have permanent jobs and land for dwellings, all resulting in a limited capacity to form groups and to save the required small amounts every week.

This is all evidence of society's pervasive insistence on treating Dalits as liabilities rather than possible assets. Without a serious change in this overall attitude, individuals as well as the nation will forever be deprived of the full potential of millions of Dalits.

37,5%

Proportion of street children interviewed who have been the victims of sexual harassment.

(Baseline survey by ARISE, 2001)

CHALLENGES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Untouchability and Descent-Based Discrimination

Both the Muslim majority and Hindu minority in Bangladesh have a hierarchical caste system with discrimination, exclusion and practices of untouchability against both Hindu Dalits and Muslim Dalits. The estimates of their numbers vary from 3,5 to 5,5 million. Most of the Hindu Dalits are descendants of Indians brought to the country since 1608 by the Mughal regime and – later – the British Colonial regime as menial labour.

Recommendation:

Vulnerability of Dalits should be properly identified. Intervention must be undertaken to create a positive attitude towards Dalits and their families in society.

State, Caste and Human Rights

The constitution of Bangladesh declares that Islam is the State religion, but bans discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth. Social exclusion is nevertheless practised over the entire country. The recently repealed Vested Property Act had a hugely discriminatory effect on Hindus. It gave the government the right to administer land formerly known as “enemy property” which was confiscated from Hindus since the formation of East Pakistan (present day Bangladesh) in 1947. Implementation of the Vested Properties Return Act from 2002 has been slow.

Recommendation:

The legislation protecting Dalits from attacks, harassment and misbehaviour must be enforced effectively and offenders prosecuted. As a signatory to the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD), the government should observe its general obligations and also implement CERD General Recommendation 29. A separate Dalit commission should be established to formulate policies to address caste discrimination and improve to lives of Dalits.

Economic and Social Status of Low Caste vis-à-vis Other Castes

The Vested Property Act and its predecessors forced an estimated 5,3 million people to emigrate from 1964-1991. Much of their land is now in the hands of powerful politicians. The remaining Hindu Dalits have very few capital assets, a fate they share with Muslim Dalits. Roughly 95% of them earn less than the national average, and they usually need to pay bribes for introduction to any kind of employment. Both Hindu Dalits (63%) and Muslim Dalits (48%) have to take regular loans because of poverty.

Recommendation:

Dalits should be leased government land on a long-term basis and supported by loans to build housing. Strong social mobilisation should be generated to uphold the status of Dalit professionals who are not only essential but real assets to society. There should be quotas for the employment of Dalits in the private and public spheres.

Nature and Extent of Untouchability and Discrimination in Social and Cultural Spheres

Many Hindu Dalits’ and, to a lesser degree, Muslim Dalits are denied access to a vast number of public and private facilities, including water sources. This pattern is repeated when it comes to religious facilities and practices and other social functions such as community feasts, weddings and funerals. Things touched by Dalits are often sprinkled with water to make them pure again.

Recommendation:

A strategy should be developed by government and NGOs in collaboration with Dalit organisations and other stakeholders to give Dalit communities access to benefits and services enjoyed by other citizens and an educational campaign against practices of caste discrimination implemented.

Economic and Market Discrimination

Dalits of both religions are often forced to work for non-Dalits without being paid because they, at times, are dependent on their help. A vast majority of Dalits experience discrimination when trying to get a loan from a bank or a moneylender – and even from the micro-lending NGOs that Bangladesh is world famous for.

Recommendation:

A sustainable livelihood approach should be adopted for Dalits to generate human, natural, social, financial and physical assets. Proper employment opportunities should be reserved for Dalits in all sectors.

Discrimination in Political Sphere

Dalits of both religions are often kept out of politics and decision making. They find it difficult to organise trade unions, elect their own leaders and vote in elections where they are commonly threatened with violence to vote against their will – or bribed to vote for a particular candidate.

Dalits experience that the government has no programmes for eradication of poverty and discrimination among them. Neither do donors of development usually include Dalits in their formulation of politics and programmes.

On top of being discriminated against and ignored, Dalit communities – particularly the Hindus – are frequently victims of active brutality such as rape, torture and burning of houses, all perpetuated by non-Dalits and often fundamentalist Muslims.

Recommendation:

Dalits should be encouraged to be involved in policy making. Provisions should be made in Parliament to prioritise the protection of Dalits during natural disasters and societal hazards such as riots.

Discrimination in Education

More than 80% of Dalits experience discrimination in admission to school: some Dalit parents are actively discouraged by teachers from sending their children. Dalit students are denied anything from scholarships to selection for sport teams and are teased by teachers and non-Dalit students. Hence their dropout rate is high. Bullying is a particular problem for Muslim Dalits who meet more non-Dalits at school than Hindu Dalits do. Dalits are not encouraged to become teachers themselves.

Recommendation:

Initiatives to create awareness among Dalits regarding social education should be undertaken by government, NGOs and media. Scholarships should be properly allocated for Dalit children in order to encourage higher education. Quota systems for Dalits should be implemented in all public and private educational institutes.

Bonded Labour

Bangladesh does not have large-scale bonded or forced labour as some other countries in South Asia. However, 26% of Hindu Dalits and 35% of Muslim Dalits are, to a larger or smaller degree, bound by loans from employers. The Constitution of Bangladesh prohibits forced or compulsory labour, including that performed by children; however, the government does not enforce this prohibition effectively. Child labour is a massive problem. A survey in 1996 revealed the existence of 6.3 million child labourers between the ages of 5 and 14 years while 19% of all children are economically active, often in hazardous jobs or prostitution. Trafficking of bonded labour to the Middle East and Pakistan is an increasing problem.

Recommendation:

Effective implementation of existing constitutional provisions and special legislation, including the Factories Act and Shops and Establishments Act, and enacting of specific provisions against bonded labour.

Multiple Discrimination of “Low Caste”/“Untouchable” Women

Bangladesh was one of the first developing countries to establish a Ministry of Women’s Affairs. But women’s lives are still overwhelmingly controlled by men, and the hardships experienced make Bangladesh one of only four countries in the world where women live shorter lives than men and are outnumbered by them. In some cases, religious Fatwas prevent women from voting. Furthermore, both Hindu and Muslim laws control the veiling of women and their invariably limited judicial rights in marriage, divorce and dowry.

Recommendation:

Advocacy programs by government and NGOs should empower Dalits and Dalit women in particular to secure protection and establishment of their human rights. Income generation schemes and relevant initiatives should be undertaken nationally for Dalit women and children.