

**Inaugural Address by Dr. Baburam Bhattarai**  
**South Asia Parliamentarians' Forum for Social Justice**  
**Strategies on Addressing Dalit Rights in Asia**  
**Organised by Asia Dalit Rights Forum**  
**25 November 2014**

Chair of the Session Honourable Meen Bahadur Bishwakarma  
Honourable Members of the Parliament from the South Asia Region  
\* Convener of the South Asia Parliamentarians' Forum Mr. Thol  
Thirumavalvan  
Chairperson, Asia Dalit Rights Forum Mr. N. Paul Divakar  
Distinguished guests  
Ladies and gentlemen

It confers me an immense delight to be a part of the session on "**Strategies on Addressing Dalit Rights in Asia**" organised by the South Asia Parliamentarians' Forum for Social Justice. I would like to confer distinctive meaning and significance to the event being convened at a moment when the 18<sup>th</sup> SAARC Summit is afoot in Kathmandu.

I would like to take this opportunity to welcome and extend my warm greetings to the Parliamentarians and distinguished guests from the South Asian Region who have congregated in Kathmandu to attend the Asia Dalit Rights Forum meeting.

I would like to extend my sincere thanks to the organisers for inviting me to be the chief guest of the session and providing me an opportunity to share my thoughts on Dalit issues in South Asia.

I am vastly impressed and made optimistic by the scholarly thoughts articulated by Honourable Parliamentarians from South Asian countries on

the issues of the Dalit rights. No matter what the origins of the Dalit are, they all share the same predicament on their political, social and economic rights.

I disagreeably record that even in the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century amidst highly advanced technological era still 260 million people are affected worldwide with caste-based discrimination, social arrangement based on occupation, leading to untouchability of those hailing from the so-called lower caste.

Conventionally speaking, Dalit is a title accorded to the group of people who are regarded as “*untouchables*”. I feel awfully carried away by the expression “*untouchables*” which I consider it as an anti-social and anti-humanistic. The terms denote all historically discriminated communities both outcastes and untouchables. Various political activists, civil society leaders have raised voices against the atrocities of whatever kind to the Dalits. . I have great admiration to those who have fought for the cause of the Dalit rights.

For centuries, the social structures in the South Asian region remained feudal and it was a conventional moral fiber of the feudal society to tyrannize the rights of the weak and marginalized groups of people. The government in any country mirrors the sentiment of the values of the hitherto society. Thus it is very sad to note here that the Dalits in our part of the world were oppressed by the state machinery as a part of the strategy to strengthen the feudal values, attitudes, beliefs and norms. For centuries in the past, the Dalits remained “*devoiced*” and estranged of the social economic and political rights in the country. If we take reference of Human Development Index at anytime in any country in the South Asia, it becomes self-evident that the Dalit were and even now are exceptionally marginalized.

Structure & thinking of the society does not revolutionize overnight. Dalit movement across the region has achieved some progress when it comes to legal rights, and in most instances they are protected by the Constitution. However, when it comes to the ground reality, the societal stigma attached to

the Dalits is not yet over. The bonafide movement is yet to begin at the social and subtle psychological level. And to the best of my perception, this is the sphere where we are yet to be on the same page.

The governments in our part of the world have, in legal terms, recognized and protected the rights of the Dalits by according titles such as Scheduled castes, Scheduled tribes etc. The governments have issued overabundance of legal regimes to prevent harassment, assault, discrimination and other criminal acts on the Schedule castes and Schedule tribes. Despite such efforts, the overall socio-economic development of the Dalits is still far below the average.

A large section of Dalit population in the region is denied, of political participation and representation in the state system and public affairs largely owing to their economic and social situations. I consider taking reference of Nepal's Maoist movement when the party launched a massive campaign against the state and societal discrimination to the Dalits. Dalit issues now seem to be the common denominator of all the political parties in Nepal. And, I highly appreciate that the Dalit issue has now been a national agenda in Nepal.

We have witnessed a number of non-state actors involved in the Dalit rights. Perhaps Dalit issue is one of the areas which are over researched. Even the state organs have issued numbers of policies and legislation to protect the rights and uplift the socio-economic plights of the Dalits. However, the Dalits still remain under-represented in the state organs and still struggling hard to get access to whatever meager services the government is providing to them. The quirk of fate is that these are the groups who need the support from the government the most, and oddly enough they are the ones who have very insignificant access to the government.

A crucial question and challenge to all of us is that despite "*acclaimed*" adequate state support and societal interests on the Dalits, why their condition is still below the normal in the region? Perhaps, Asia Dalit Rights Forum could probe deep into this issue. To the best of my understanding, I consider

this a manifestation of lack of serious commitment on the part of the government and political actors compounded by social stigma attached to the Dalits.

At a very subtle level, it is witnessed that even the Dalit community is not free from hierarchy and intra and inter-community discrimination. Some serious work is still imperative in this regard. The degree of vulnerability within the Dalit community is very uneven, especially when it comes to the women rights within the Dalits community. The Human Development Index of the Dalit across the region is extremely uneven which is even more severe amongst the women community with-in the Dalits. The anguish of the Dalit women scales up very high in terms of gender-based violence and domestic violence.

Institutionally speaking, many countries in the region have accorded special rights and privileges to the Dalits, such as allocation of quota and reservations. It would be out of the ordinary to note here that the Comprehensive Peace Agreement and the Interim Constitution of Nepal have ensured the Dalit participation in the state organs through the principles of inclusiveness & proportional representation. With a view to ensure the participation of marginalized communities including the Dalits, the electoral law has been made more inclusive especially through the incorporation of provision on proportional electoral representation system in Nepal.

Nepal is currently working on drafting the new Constitution through the Constituent Assembly. Though we have some issues of serious concerns in the Constitution writing process, the first CA and current Constitutional-Political Dialogue and Consensus Committee has unanimously agreed to ensure the social, economic and political rights of the marginalized communities including that of the Dalits. Particularly noteworthy feature of the proposed draft constitution is the provision of special rights to Dalits as compensation to past injustices.

We have witnessed various international platforms working together on the Dalit agenda across the globe. I would like to appeal the international policy makers to work towards increased social justice, equality, inclusion and the recognition of the human rights. We need to design and develop a common framework for the elimination of discrimination based on work and "descent".

The Asia Dalit Rights Forum is beginning to take up the agenda at the regional level. I think we need to work together to link the national issues with that of the regional ones and work on the common theme that calls for regional outlook. In the impending SAARC Summit meeting, perhaps, the deliberations from this event can be introduced as an agenda item to be discussed and deliberated at an appropriate level.

I would like to acknowledge and appreciate the work of the Asia Dalit Rights Forum and South Asia Parliamentarians' Forum, and would like to express my commitment for the continued interests and support to the work of the Forums. The Forums could work together in preparing the national data base of the Dalits through national mapping exercises which can be authentic resources for the governments of the member countries.

The South Asian Parliamentarians' Forum can work together in introducing the common agenda of the Dalits in the corresponding national parliaments of the member governments for a better synergy at the regional level. *As Nepal is in the process of writing a new constitution thro' the CA, we shall be more than happy to contribute towards the success of this Forum.* Once again, I would like to extend my sincere appreciation to the organizers and wish a grand success of the event in Kathmandu, Nepal.

Thank you.