

Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network

Many significant events took place in Pakistan in 2008. One of the most significant was the launch of the national report on caste-based discrimination entitled "Long Behind Schedule - a Study on the Plight of Scheduled Castes". On September 5th Pakistan Institute of Labour Research (PILER) and Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP) had jointly organised the launch of the research report. The guest of honour was Nisar Ahmad Khuhro, Provincial President of Pakistan Peoples Party (PPP). Nisar Ahmad Khuhro admitted that some form of discrimination had always existed, but the situation was aggravated during General Ziaul Haq's era due to the promulgation of a number of discriminatory laws. The main reason for the enactment of such draconian laws was just to prolong his tenure by creating divisions among various sections of society, on the basis of ethnicity and sects. Nisar Ahmad Khuhro appreciated the efforts of TRDP and PILER, with the support of IDSN and The Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS), for conducting the research study on caste-based discrimination in Pakistan. Moreover, Manoo Bheel, whose nine family members were kidnapped years back and who had been protesting since then, was also invited. The various speakers urged the relevant authorities to take action for the recovery of his family members.

Another significant event was the February 2008 election in Pakistan that brought the PPP into power. Particularly the poor and marginalised communities have been adherents of the PPP with the slogan roti, kapra or makan (food, clothes and shelter). The new Government assigned Dr Khatu Mal Jeewan, belonging to the Scheduled Caste community, as advisor to Chief Minister in Sindh. Similarly Shehbaz Bhatti from the minority Christian community became the Federal Minister of Minority Affairs. In the course of the year many people of Scheduled Caste working as bonded labourers were freed. The Government is also making plans for the rehabilitation of these freed communities by introducing low cost housing schemes and distribution of land to landless women. Moreover, the Sindh Government formed an independent task force team for the planning and commission of such developments. Encouragingly, Dr Sono Khangharani, director of TRDP, was selected as one of the members of this team.

A series of press conferences on the issue of Scheduled Caste Hindus in Punjab were jointly organised by the Haray Rama Foundation, Scheduled Caste Rights Movement and Hindu Balmik Sudhar Saba. They unanimously demanded that the Government gave representation to an estimated 450,000 people of the Scheduled Caste population living in Punjab in the national and provincial assemblies, and for the restoration of a 6% job quota for the Scheduled Caste community in Pakistan. These issues, among others, were highlighted and got wider coverage through the electronic and printed media.

Member organisations of the Pakistan Dalit Solidarity Network (PDSN), addressing the rights and livelihoods of Dalits, remained in close contact with each other, and kept the PDSN well informed about their activities. All Pakistan Meghwar Council, Thar Murk, Haray Rama Foundation, Hindu Balmik Sudhar Sabah, Bhil Sujab Itahad, Scheduled Caste Educational Association Hyderabad, Scheduled Caste Federation of Pakistan and All Pakistan Kolhi Association of Sindh (AKAS), are all playing a vital role in raising awareness amongst communities in different parts of the country.

In March 2008 PDSN held its quarterly meeting in Mithi Tharpakar. Here Ms. Madhuri shared her progress report from the Dalit Women Working Group meeting held in February in Kathmandu and in the South Asian Women's Consultation held in March in Thailand. She suggested formulating a Dalit Women Working Committee in Pakistan, a suggestion that was unanimously supported by all present. Remarkably, the Committee was formed in September 2008. Initially it has 15 female members from the Sindh province. More members are currently being identified in other provinces.

Several publications on Dalit issues were released in 2008. The book 'Hedha Thian Hanja' written by Dolat Thari contains stories, interviews and case studies of people who fell victims of the most influential and well-known dominant family in Tharparkar. In addition several articles were published on the murder of the Dalit Jagesh Kumar, the case of blasphemy in Karachi and stories published in THE NEWS written by journalist Jan Khaskheli on the issues of the excluded communities Kolhi and Phils, respectively.

Together with IDSN, the network also contributed actively to international advocacy, both in the context of the Universal Periodic Review of Pakistan in May and in preparation of the CERD review of Pakistan in 2009. Moreover, Dr. Sono Khangharani was invited together with IDSN to participate in a meeting of the Pakistan Support Group, which is an informal network of civil society organisations that work through international human rights mechanisms to promote national issues at UN and EU level.