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DALIT CHILDREN IN BANGLADESH: REALITY AND WAY FORWARD



We take it for granted that our children can pursue and succeed in any field they aspire to excel in, enjoying the basic human rights and opportunities that are available to almost any human being. However, for the Dalits of Bangladesh, terms such as 'human rights', 'opportunity' or 'success' are but a faraway dream - a luxury they are not offered. This community has been employed in specific professions involving physical labour for generations past. It seems to be predestined that a Dalit child will become a sweeper, cobbler or barber because it is her or his fathers' ancestral occupation.

Institutionally educated persons are rare among Dalits. Dalit children who are admitted to schools often get victimized and discriminated against by their teachers and/or fellows. This is at a level where it is enough to make them indifferent to formal education. According a recent study, 28.5% of the Dalit children remain out of enrollment. This statistic is in stark contradiction to the national statistic (96.7% enrolment). The study also shows that 68% of the Dalit children drop out due to poor economic status and caste-based discrimination. 26% of these children faced obstacles in getting admission to the educational institute despite qualifying.

30% children and youth in different institutions and in different stages faced negligence or hateful behaviour from classmates, staff and others. This includes being prohibited from sitting in the front row, using common materials such as glasses for drinking water, plates etc. In some cases they have to sit on the floor. Teachers also discourage the Dalit children from being admitted and also are either reluctant or downright refuse to coach them. Different types of discrimination and the practice of making it taboo to touch the Dalit children are rampant in the educational institute, and result in poor enrolment as well as high dropout rates. This discourages parents to send their children to school; instead they are interested in grooming their children in the family profession. Thus, from a very young age the majority of the Dalit youth and children become involved in labour. The study on Caste Based Discrimination (CBD) shows that the children who dropped out, 18% are involved in the child labour while others engage in household work. The involvement of Dalit children in labour and their leaving education certainly diminishes quantity of skilled workforce not only among this community, but also of the country as a whole.

The social exclusion they face due to their identity based on descent and work increases because of a lack of social participation, which impeding their natural development. Dalit youth and children are never allowed in any child and/or youth development program or activity. In most cases the Dalit students are not given due chances to prove their talent or performances in sports or games at school. "You are the son of lower caste, you must get out." These were the words with which the Headmaster and other teachers of Voigati Government Primary School, Monirampur sub-district of Jessore ousted 70 students belonging to the Dalit community from the Independence Day Event (The Daily Prothom Alo, 3 April 2010). Though there is some club culture among the Dalits, such clubs mainly involve organizing religious rituals (Pooja) or providing a place for the elders to gossip. Any culture of having a community library or youth social activism is absent in this community.

Physical environment of their living conditions contributes to the undisciplined growing up of the Dalit children and youth. Dalits are pushed to live in small and densely populated houses without any civic facilities. It is a common feature of their colonies to lack pure drinking water, gas and electricity. The environment of these settlements is full of chaos and commotion, with filthy and dirty living areas unequipped with drainage systems and inadequate and sub-standard toilet facilities. Dalit children have had to live in such unhygienic environments generation after generation. The study on CBD shows that even today, 22% of the Dalit population do not have three meals a day; untouchability and caste based discrimination impact their economic activities, and as a result half of them earn below the average monthly income, which affects the nutrition of the children.

Vulnerability of girl children in the Dalit community is so acute that 76% of them face child marriage. Physical, mental and sexual harassment is very common to the Dalit girl children. Dalit girls feel insecure since they have observed that in most of the occasions, Bengali boys take it as their right or privilege to physically touch or push a Dalit girl when they see her on the street. The CBD study finds that 41% respondents experienced physical and mental torture by Dalit and non-Dalit men. Besides, patriarchal attitudes also impede the development of Dalit girls. A big portion of Dalit male members believe that girls are born to do household chores and give birth to children. Many parents still prefer to spend for boys rather than girl children.

State mechanism, policy, national standard

Bangladesh is one of the first 20 countries to ratify the Convention on the Rights of the Child which is based on the principles of Non-Discrimination, Best Interest, Participation and Survival & Development of children. The principle of non-discrimination describes: All children have equal rights to protection from abuse and exploitation regardless of their race, religion, ethnicity or socio-economic status. They should be encouraged to fulfil their potential and inequalities should be challenged. As a convention ratifying country it is obligatory for Bangladesh to fully realization the tenets of the convention. Besides, Article 27 of the constitution of Bangladesh has declared that all citizens are equal before law, while Article 28 has renounced all kind of discrimination. Despite constitutional and legal mechanisms, Dalit children and youth people are being isolated in the regards of education, development, participation and discriminated everywhere for their caste identity. Leaving such a huge potential human force inactive impedes the overall development of the country. Therefore, state along with non-state actors have to come forward with special programmes or agendas to ensure the development of Dalit children and youth.

Immediate Tasks

- Produce disaggregated data of the Dalit and Excluded communities which would help in knowing the situation of the children and youth, making it possible to take specific measures for their development;
- Include material against untouchability and caste based discrimination in school text books and train the teachers to address such discriminatory practice;
- Ensure equal participation of the Dalit children and youth in the programmes of the educational institute, helping expose their potential;
- Ensure full entitlement of government services such as education scholarships, stipends etc.;
- Allow dalit children to participate in social clubs, functions and activities with the rest of the population;
- Enact laws against untouchability and discrimination, declaring the practices as punishable offences.

Reference

- 1) পারভেজ, আলতাফ ও মাজহারুল ইসলাম, (অক্টোবর ২০১৪), বাংলাদেশের দলিত সমাজ: বৈষম্য, বঞ্চনা ও অস্পৃশ্যতা, প্রকাশনায় বাংলাদেশ দলিত ও বঞ্চিত জনগোষ্ঠী অধিকার আন্দোলন (বিডিইআরএম) ও নাগরিক উদ্যোগ।
- 2) Five years progress report, Ministry of Primary and Mass Education, Bangladesh, www.mopme.gov.bd
- 3) The Daily Prothom Alo, 3 April, 2010.
- 4) Benchmarking the Draft UN Principles and Guidelines on the Elimination of (Caste) Discrimination based on Work and Descent, Bangladesh Report, October-2014, published by Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) and Nagorik Uddyog.

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