



1 UNTOUCHABILITY AND DALIT COMMUNITY: PERSPECTIVE BANGLADESH

Children are born free and with independent entity. But it is almost a dream for the Dalits in Bangladesh to live as a free citizen. This community is employed with some specific occupation from remote past. These occupations are physical labour based and embedded with perpetuate poverty and disparity. People of this community are suffering within a hard arena of economic, social and political oppression and exploitation in all over the South Asia.

Dalits are considered as impure and filthy due to their work and descent. This factor forced them to live seclude from the so-called 'pure' or mainstream society. It seems to be destined that a Dalit child will be a sweeper, a cobbler or a barber because it is her/his fathers' ancestral job. Changing occupation is not enough for this community to get rid of the image made of a perpetual time frame.

They are identified in the society as downtrodden untouchable people. It is thought that anything they touch will become impure. They are often barred to enter in restaurants or in hair dressers' shop. This untouchability is more evident in rural than urban area and it is for their work and descent.

Highly educated people are rare in Dalit community. School going children of Dalit community are often victimized of discrimination by their teachers and/or fellows which discourage them to go to school. Despite the struggle, if some of them become educated, are deprived again to get suitable job due to their identity.

Despite the citizen of the country, Dalits are deprived from getting equal rights in health, education, employment opportunity and housing. They are not allowed to buy land, build or rent houses in the premises of the residential areas of mainstream people. They are bound to live in colonies and in the places listed for them. Their access to temple and in religious festival is also prohibited.

Nirmal Chandra of Gaibandha district is one of the practical examples of untouchability practices in Bangladesh. Owner of a road side tea stall denied serving him tea because he belongs to Dalit community. But the pet monkey of the owner was drinking tea beside the stall. Nirmal retorted, "Even a monkey can drink from the stall but not me! This tradition is ongoing for hundred of years. We are born as human being but in reality we are not. We are Dalits". Babul Robidas, a lawyer, has faced similar attitude recently by his colleagues in the Jaipurhat court canteen. The canteen owner was forced to change the utensils after Babul and some other of Dalit and indigenous community people used some common utensils at the canteen. Babul Rabidas had to pay for a new set.

There are lots of examples of untouchability towards Dalits in Bangladesh. Chairman of Jalalabad Union Council, Kolaroa subdistrict, Satkhira turn out a Dalit applicant youth saying, "you, son of the cobbler, how dare to ask for the job!" Head Master along with his colleagues of Bhojgati Government Primary School situated at Monirampur Sub-district of Jessore expelled 70 Dalit students from the national liberation day observance event. He stated "you are from downtrodden impure community, you are supposed to not to participate in such a big event." Guardians of the Dalit students stop sending their children at school as protest and complained the occurrence to sub-district Education Officer.

Mundomala, Head Master of the local High School of Tanor sub-district, Rajshahi, was denied to serve meal at a local restaurant because the restaurant did not have separate utensils for the Dalits and Dalits are not allowed to take food in the same utensils with mainstreams. Eleven Santal students left Tanor Degree College hostel as they were forced to use separate utensils.

Constitution of Bangladesh (Article 27) has declared that all citizens are equal before law, article 28 has renounced all kind of discrimination, and article 29 has said equality of opportunity in public employment. Article 7 of Universal Declaration Human Rights (UDHR), article 2 of International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), article 19 of the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (CERD) has asked for equal rights and honor for all human being irrespective of their birth, caste, religion or nationality. Instead of all these good thoughts, Dalits and socially excluded people of this country are being discriminated in the sphere of politics, society, citizenship, culture and economy. There is no law against social discrimination and untouchability. As a result its victims can not even ask for legal assistance.

Dalits and socially excluded people of Bangladesh are facing major problem of untouchability along with poverty and dispossession. They carry the curse of untouchability from cradle to the grave. These factors have subdued them with the identity of the lowest class in the society and deprived them from their basic citizen rights.

Immediate tasks

- Enact law against untouchability and all sorts of discrimination against Dalits;
- Recognize the Dalits in the constitution and formulate separate development policy for them;
- Create mass awareness on Dalits Human Rights;
- Introduce special procedures of bringing Dalits under the rehabilitation programs of government during natural disaster;
- Take necessary measures for desegregated data for Dalit during national census.

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নাগরিক উদ্যোগ
NAGORIK UDDYOG
CITIZEN'S INITIATIVE

E-mail : info@nuhr.org
Website: www.nuhr.org

BDERM Bangladesh Dalit and
Excluded Rights Movement
বাংলাদেশ দলিত ও বঞ্চিত জনগোষ্ঠী অধিকার আন্দোলন

E-mail : bdermb@gmail.com
Website: www.bderm.org

Contact Address : House no. 8/14, Block-B, Lalmatia, Dhaka-1207, Tel : 0088 02 8115868