

## SAMATA FOUNDATION, Nepal

### “Envisioning New Nepal: Dynamics of Caste, Identity and Inclusion of Dalits”

Conference, 20<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> June 2010

Wrapping up on the conference

Empowering Dalit: Identity, Dignity, Access and Freedom

For the first time in the history of Nepal an international conference on Dalit has been held. As we envision a new Nepal, perhaps for the first time even the walls of Godawari Resort became witness to the coming together of Dalit activist, politicians, academicians, intellectuals from around the world to discuss the complex problems Dalits face. The purpose of the Conference is to awaken all Nepalis to take responsibility and rectify the historical injustice meted out to Dalits. It seems like a familiar topic, but in the past two and a half days we have witnessed that there is much more to learn about dalit issues. Then we can claim to know Prof. Thorat broke the ground by conceptualizing dalit problems, what constitutes caste discrimination and what policies are necessary to address at this crucial juncture of nation making in Nepal. He said that general policies to address poverty etc. are necessary but since Dalit face special problems of untouchability, they are not sufficient. Policies that specifically address Dalit problems are also necessary. He enlightened us from the experiences in India and Ambedkar's efforts in addressing this issue for the long run. These efforts include constitution that should give equal rights to everybody; mere acceptance as equal doesn't guarantee therefore legal safeguards against discrimination is needed; and political participation of discriminated should be increased with positive measures in economic, civil and political spheres through affirmative policy.

Ahuti, CA member brought out the challenges faced by Dalit movement in Nepal. He highlighted party-led factionalism within Dalits as a weakening force. He also said that Dalit movement still suffers from a lack of seriousness, slave mentality and *puchhar lagne baani* (subservient to leaders) . He also talked about achievements made since the election of the constitution assembly two years ago. A major achievement is the election of 50 dalit CA members. For the Dalit movement in the coming year, he strongly put forward a need for united movement in three fronts – the CA, political parties, and the streets. And, inability to unify for the dalit cause will prevent us from realizing our dreams and aspirations that we have carried for the past 60 years.

Six sessions and two round-table discussion were held in this international conference. Topics covered in the sessions are:

- Dalits in South Asia,
- Human rights and dignity,
- Identity and Dalit's Politics,
- Globalization and Dalit Social Movement,
- Development Paradox,
- Constitution Building and Peace Process.

The two roundtable discussions focused on Constitution Building and State Restructuring and Affirmative Action in South Asia.

Reflecting on these sessions, the following four themes emerged as most pressing.

#### **Identity:**

In the conversation, debates surfaced on the definition of dalit. Speakers and participants repeatedly emphasized that all dalits are not the same. There are Pahadi Dalits, Madhesi dalits, women dalits and furthermore there is discrimination within dalits. Therefore, one of the most important lessons from the conference is to recognize the heterogeneity within the dalit community but at the same time develop a common identity that is acceptable to all Dalits. The heterogeneity also poses a challenge: how do we define dalit identity and how do we work together while preserving independent

identities. The meaning of the word 'dalit' varies from India to Bangladesh, from Madhes to Pahad. The fluidity of the word Dalit compels us to question whether the term connotes the same thing, and some might ask if it needs to be changed.

### **Socio-economic achievement**

The wide socio-economic inequality between dalit and non-dalit persists. The presentations and experiences shared by participants from different parts of Nepal as well from India, Sri Lanka, Bangladesh and Pakistan helped everyone to walk through the whole range of oppressed conditions Dalit face in access to services as fundamental as education, water, health, land and livelihood from the mountains to the plains and from east to western parts of Nepal. A participant expressed that "only those who experienced oppression knows the pain of oppression." The presentations exposed us, to a certain extent, the oppression experienced by dalit communities in different parts of Nepal, the case of Mugu, Siraha, Saptari as an example.

### **Human Right and Dignity**

The inhuman treatment of Dalits, especially dalit women, through rape, torture, extrajudicial killings, is still a brutal reality of everyday life of dalits. Being witness to these inhuman treatments in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is a crime, for which we are all accountable. Ending these crimes requires special human rights protections for the Dalits. Dalits should be treated as equally as everybody else. Dignity in Dalit identity comes from treating Dalits equally.

Dalits are endowed with a multitude of skills. Because these occupational skills are associated to caste, their skills are often overshadowed by the incidence of visible forms of oppression. Efforts are needed to embark on the positive attributes of Dalits in the nation making process. Nepal is presently cursed for disrespecting and undervaluing these special skills of Dalits. Appreciation of their skills can be a first step to giving dignity to Dalits.

### **Inclusion and political representation in nation making process**

While acknowledging the social, cultural and religious aspects of the Dalit problem, the Conference highlighted that Dalit issue is largely a political issue. Its solutions have to come out through a political process of inclusion, representation and engagement at all levels. The present time provides a fertile ground to bring substantial change. We have to seize the moment.

### **Way forward:**

Lastly, what is the way forward for Dalits, what is their role, in the nation-building process? Albeit an important question, we may not have the answers for all this. What we know for sure is that the discourse on the role of Dalits should continue.

- Political parties involved in the initial panel came out short on the policies for Dalit's empowerment. Beyond the rhetoric they could not offer a vision, or any concrete policies for eliminating discrimination, providing compensation, in restructuring Nepal. It is up to the Dalit community to pressure more effectively their agenda at this juncture of constitution making process.
- The importance to emphasize heterogeneity and to forge a common identity to take the movement forward is stressed.
- It is important to recognize that class and caste feeds into each other.
- The conference highlighted that the issue of federalism and Dalit position within this debate needs to be further informed and nuanced discussions.
- To address multiple problems Dalit face, multiple policies and mechanisms are necessary, including affirmative action policies, reservation in the public and private sector, access to land, reparation/compensation for past and present discrimination.
- More research on different problems faced by different Dalit subgroups and on positive aspects such as cultural and history is necessary to understand the problems and propose policies to address them
- It is important to develop an international network to strengthen the Dalit movement.
- Learn from negative aspects and embark on positive aspects

The Conference taught us how much more we have to learn on this issue, which we have ignored for so long. It also taught us that co-learning for collective understanding is imperative and this first international conference in Nepal has increased our commitment in this voyage of understanding and action.