

Case Studies of Dalit Women in Pakistan

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“Education and Skills would change fate of my community”

Moolan Bai

Ms. Moolan Bai, age 65, a retired teacher, lives in Mithi, Pakistan. She is a chairperson of the Local Support Organization (LSO), a mini NGO in Mithi, Tharparkar supported by Thardeep Rural Development Programme (TRDP). By caste she is a Bangi. This community is placed at the bottom of caste hierarchy, as well as the Dalit sub-caste hierarchy. They are sometimes also called Gujrati as they came from Gujrat before the partition between



“The fate of my community would be changed through education and learning of new skills, if the government gives attention to their development”. Ms. Moolan Bai, Mithi, Pakistan.

Pakistan and India. In Mithi, there are around 60 households of her caste people. Her family all work as manual scavenger/sanitary workers. Ms. Moolan’s family is educated; her late husband was also teacher. She has three sons and one daughter, her daughter is health worker and one son is teacher.

Ms Moolan’s father was working in the Railway as a sweeper. Although he was illiterate, he ensured that all his children got an education in the village Denghan Burgri, Taluka Jamesabad, District Mirupurkhas. Ms Moolan did her graduation from Tando Mohammad Khan, and was soon appointed as a teacher in Mir Ji landi girl’s school. After one year, she got a new job at Jamesabad Girls’ School.

In 1965 she got married to Mr. Rano Mal in the town called Chelhar Tharparkar. At that time in Chelhar, there was no female teacher and little awareness of girls’ education. She encouraged various upper caste people to enroll their girls in school. Luckily today many of the upper caste educated females, who were her students, have become teachers.

Moolan says that she taught a few years in Chelhar. Then in 1982, her family shifted in Mithi town, where she started to teach in Mithi Government Schools. In her community, she was the only female teacher and her all children were educated. The community, she lived in with her family, was a separate colony known as “Bhangi Paro” where many worked as manual scavengers. This is considered one of the lowest, most polluted and degrading occupations. The whole community was therefore always treated as “polluting” by the majority of upper caste peoples. Ms. Moolan Bai says that social discrimination against their community was visible everywhere. For example, they could not use the same utensils in hotels, offices and workplaces. Due to their low profile work, there was no exception to mixing scheduled castes with other caste peoples, and even between the scheduled castes.

“Discrimination has been exercised for long by the upper caste people”, Ms. Moolan says. She remembers how she used to have a separate glass for drinking water in school, although she had “good women colleague friends belonging to the upper caste”. Fortunately she was a head mistress, so her subordinates were showing her respect, and she did not feel discriminated against. But she always knew her limitations as a low caste woman.

Ms. Moolan says that other women become double victims of social discrimination compared to her situation, due to their work situation. In her community most of the young girls do not work outside due to insecurity and harassment. She said manual scavenging is a hereditary occupation so their community doesn’t come out of this to change their profession by giving education to their children. However, others are also not ready to uplift their community. She said earlier there was hardly one percent literacy but since few years their communities have started to give some basic education to their children and currently 20 to 30 percent of their community children are enrolled in schools however this number would be increased if someone motivates to their people.

Ms, Moolan said, her family had provided land for school free of cost that was constructed few years back in their hamlet but that dysfunctional due to unavailability of teacher and furniture, however their children are enrolled in other schools of government and privates in Mithi. Recently their community has received 10 more job opportunities from local MNA and all these jobs are low profile sanitary workers but there is no high profile or clerical job for their community despite some of their children are qualified for good job. Ms Moolan Shown CV of her nephew who possess MBA degree but he is jobless. She said, it is general impression from others that there community can’t do any dignified work except manual scavenger /sanitary work. Due to this indifference attitude in society against them their community people don’t be willing to give education to their children.

Ms Moolan says: “The fate of my community would be changed through education and learning of new skills, if the government gives attention to their development. The upper caste people - at least the progressive ones - should sit with their community and encourage them, so they know their rights as equal citizens and can live a life in dignity and respect.”

Radha Bhil

Ms. Radha Bhil, age 34, lives in Sattar Nagar Mirpurkhas. For two years, she has been associated with a local NGO working as a social mobilizer. Besides this, she is also a founding member of Bhil Intellectual Forum (BIF), formed in 2012. Radha has a graduation degree. "After passing primary education in my village, I had to go to town for mid-level education. In school, I was harassed, teased and stared at several times by the young boys," she explains. Describing the harassment, Radha says that it is common everywhere. "Women and girls from the lower caste or religious minority are easy targets for harassment, because the majority knows that they are weak and cannot take any action", Radha says.

Radha got married in 1994 at the age of 17. She has five children: Four sons and one daughter. Her elder children are enrolled in schools. "They are discriminated in many ways, for example by being assigned to sit in the last rows in school, and being called nicknames. The attitude of fellow students is not good; sometimes they invite children from the lower castes to convert to Islam. In schools, the syllabus which they read is biased and discriminatory. Sometimes minority children cannot study their own religion in school, as the Muslim children can," Radha explains.

"When people from our community visit other towns or cities, they cannot proudly introduce themselves as Hindu or scheduled caste/Bhil. Scheduled caste women face discrimination when they travel, in markets, hospitals and other public places, especially due to the way they dress, their language and color. People make derogatory remarks against them. Female workers face more discrimination and harassment, particularly those who work in others' home as cleaners or those who do agricultural labor in the field. They are sexually assaulted and harassed, but such news not come up on media. Young scheduled caste girls are raped by landlords and their Munchis. Sometimes these girls are asked to make their friends and guests happy. However, if any girl or woman resists, they are threatened with dire consequences or asked to return their debt and leave their village," she explains.



"Women and girls from the lower caste or religious minority are easy targets for harassment, because the majority knows that they are weak and cannot take any action," says Ms. Radha Bhil.

“Ten years ago my younger sister-in law, who was married, was shot by a landlord as she refused to ‘make friendship with him’. She also witnessed an incident in the village Mubarak rind Tharparkar, where an entire scheduled caste family converted into Islam because they were indebted and the landlord wrote off their loan of Rs. 60,000.” Sharing another story, Radha recalls a case from 1993 in District Sanghar, where one of her daughters-in-law was taken by a Mangrio (Muslim) boy, where she was forcefully converted and remarried to him. After a few years he left her, and now she lives alone with no one to take care of her. Radha says that scheduled caste Hindus are not even allowed to bury dead bodies in upper caste graveyards. In one incident, a ten-day old body of a Hindu person was removed out from a Muslim graveyard.

Recalling her personal story, Radha says that after passing intermediate level in school, she was admitted for a PTC (teaching) course in Hyderabad. She got many good friends at the school, but she still experienced harassment. “One day I went to meet my Muslim friend in her home. After sitting with her for a while, my friend’s mother asked another family member to bring me a cup of tea; this cup was kept in a separate shelf for scheduled caste people. For a while, I remained silent and couldn’t respond. But after finishing the tea, I didn’t return the cup to them. When my friend asked why, I told her that ‘now this is my cup, and I will take it with me wherever I go, even if I visit you again.’ My friend was embarrassed and apologized, but I couldn’t say anything to make her realize the situation.” Radha remembers that when friends visited her home, some would eat at her place and others would not. “I would offer food to everyone, but wouldn’t insist. Nor would I bother to bring them special things from the market or neighboring upper caste houses. In many scheduled caste families, this is otherwise the general practice; bringing and serving packed food from the market to upper caste people.”

Radha shares her views on ways to address the problem. “I know the problem is big, but it could be solved by taking multiple actions and steps. The first step would be to bring equality among scheduled castes, e.g. when inter-caste marriages are happening between scheduled castes. This would unite them and reduce hatred and discrimination within the community. Secondly, we should demand that the government eliminates hate speech in the school curriculum. Speaking on the issue of forced conversion of minorities and scheduled caste women and girls, she recommended that it be stopped through law and orientation of religious persons about the true interpretation of their religion. She said that an increasing number of minority and scheduled caste people in the national and provincial assembly should bring their plight at forefront of politics and mainstream their issues in public and political life.

Kirshana Lal

Kirshana Lal (age 33) belongs to the Kolhi clan, which is at the bottom of hierarchy among scheduled caste and known as the most vulnerable caste. She lives in Hyderabad since 16 years, however originally she belongs to Tharparkar village Danagham Taluka Nangarparkar. She has Master degree from sociology and associated with NGO, where she work as counselor in legal aid center.



Ms. Kirshana Lal, Hyderabad, Pakistan: "Discrimination in cities has reduced to some extent, but in villages it is rampant".

Her family is a victim of bonded labor; around 25 years ago they migrated from Tharparkar to barrage area for the search of livelihood, where they indebted by working as agriculture laborer to

landlord, consequently her family moved from one landlord to another and from one city to another in Sindh including Kunri, Jhudo, Badin and Mirpurkhas. In that period her family suffered a lot and her education remained disturb, even the landlords didn't like her family children get education. While taking a tag of scheduled caste and being a girl, even within family and community, she was not encouraged by anyone to continue her education but it was her own efforts and will, which helped her to continue education. After passing grade 8, she got married, fortunately her in-laws were good, so they encouraged her and in this way she completed her post-graduation from sociology.

Speaking on the issues of caste discrimination, she remembers the days when she studied in primary school in a village called Meeran Jo School, located near the Digree town in Sindh. "In school we girls from the Kolhi community were not allowed to drink water from a glass. When we were thirsty, we had to cup our hands and have water poured in our hands from high up. My fellow girls from the Meer caste were in well-dressed, so the teacher only gave importance to them and we were ignored. Even the attitudes of other fellow girls were not good towards us," she recalls.

Kirshana says: "Discrimination in cities has reduced to some extent, but in villages it is rampant. Scheduled caste women's are easy targets of sexual harassment, kidnapping and forced conversions into another religion." She describes how one year ago, a married woman from the Kolhi community in Judho town was kidnapped by a Muslim, as revenge

against her husband who spoke against them. After one month's struggle, she was recovered but there was no punishment given to perpetrators as they were from influential caste.

“The incidence of kidnapping, forced conversion and sexual harassment of scheduled caste and minority girls are often and most frequently happening in the provinces of Sindh and South Punjab”, she explains. As a result, the majority of the parents hesitate to send their daughters to schools and out of the home. She points out some recent incidences involving two Dalit child girls. 14 year-old Momal converted into Islam, and 6-year old Viganti was raped. But no action was taken to punish the perpetrators. Kirshana says that despite the enactment of the law on Protection against Harassment of Women at Workplace, there is very little implementation at the grass root level. The young Dalit women and girls, who work in the agricultural sector, are more vulnerable to violence, harassment and rape. But the media does not pick up such cases. The rape case of Kastoori Kolhan became a high profiled case in the national and international media. But no real action was taken, “Unfortunately justice is only for the rich; not for the poor and lower caste people. We cannot change our status, until we fight against this injustice. And to fight for justice, we need to educate our people,” Kirshana says.

Bhagwani Rathore

Bhagwani Rathore (age 34) belongs to the Menghwar Caste in the village Godhiyo/Dabho Nijar. She was born in Mithi, the district head quarter of district Tharparkar, as her father was a government employee there. Ms. Rathore is a post graduate, and is currently associated with an NGO at a senior management level position. Luckily, she grew up in towns, and had the opportunity to get an education. “We did not have our own house in the town, and we used to live in upper caste community's hamlets, as they had comparatively good houses available for rent. So I have a good experience of caste differences from my very early age, with regards to living and



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studying with upper caste children.

Rathore says: “The first time I was enrolled in a government primary school, I found that the majority of girls were from the upper caste Hindu and Muslims communities. The teachers and the students both introduced me as a Menghwar girl, saying “look one Meghwari came in a school.” But as time passed, I became friends with my class fellows and studied and played together with them, except when eating. Nor was I permitted to drink water from the same glass in school. When I passed primary school and enrolled in class six, the head teacher was from the lower Hindu Caste “Bhangi”. That meant that we both had separate glasses, even though she had a superior position in the school. But caste made her inferior too. “I used to study at a tuition center after school, which was run by an upper caste teacher at his home,” Rathore recollects. “The wife of my teacher did not allow me to drink from their glasses. In school, whenever I answered a question, the teacher used to make all other the student realize that something extraordinary or unexpected had happened by saying “look... how intelligent the Meghwar girl is... shame on you all”.

Rathore says that most of the time, her friends and their families and neighbors used to say: “You don’t look like a Meghwar; you dress, study, and eat as an upper caste. I then used to feel proud of myself, knowing that I did not look like a Meghwar. Whenever relatives from other villages came to our home, I kept my background a secret with friends and neighbors. In that way I could maintain my good impression in the eyes of others. I never felt bad when I was treated differently in school or at a tuition center. Sometimes I was ashamed of being a Meghwar girl, and wished I could belong to the upper caste community,” Ms. Rathore recalls. “As a child, I accepted whatever was practiced around me. I could not differentiate between wrong and right. But later, the awareness, exposure visits and the sharing of severe incidents of caste discrimination by elders made me realize the difference.”

“My mother, grandmother and other relatives always shared with me, how they were criticized by upper caste women, when they wore the same kind of clothes or jewelry in village as them. The lower caste women used to wear certain types of dresses and jewelry and were not allowed to stitch their clothes as an upper caste. My grandfather and uncle used to come to our home in groups, where they would discuss about land disputes with upper castes. Because my grandfather was approved to live on his own land, he had a separate well for drinking water. Having a separate well at that time meant that he was free from bondage from upper caste persons in the village,” Ms. Rathore explains. In Sindh, most bonded laborers are from the scheduled caste community. They are landless peasants; also known as Haris. Ms. Rathore says that if scheduled castes get entitlements to live and work on their own land, they can work on their choice, rather to work for others and be trapped into bondage.

“This form of discrimination is deeply rooted within us. To shape a positive society, awareness should be given to the children from a very early age about equality, equal rights and justice for all. In this way, discrimination can be stopped gradually,” Ms. Rathore says.