

We are not thought of as human

In Dhaka, our runner-up **Mary Griffin** hears how the Dalit women of Bangladesh are struggling to end generations of oppression

If you are not considered to be human, human rights do not apply to you," says Moni Rani, walking under lines of brightly-coloured laundry decorating dilapidated buildings like bunting.

The kaleidoscopic colours of this cramped south Dhaka community disguise the dark reality that its 4,000 residents live apart from the rest of the city's citizens. As a Dalit, Moni inhabits one of the capital's 27 so-called "colonies", reserved for the men and women destined to do Dhaka's dirtiest jobs. These people, whose ancestors were left out of the four-tier Hindu caste hierarchy, are literally outcasts. Known as "untouchables" because they are shunned by the rest of society, and labelled Harijan (children of God) by Gandhi, they have adopted the name Dalit, from the Sanskrit for "down-trodden".

Based on a notion of purity and pollution, the caste system has led Dalits to be considered unclean and historically, in some communities, they were forced to wear a bell alerting others of their approach. Today, they still face resistance - and often outright refusal - when attempting to enter temples, restaurants and schools, for fear they will contaminate the higher castes.

Reminiscent of apartheid-era South Africa, Dalits - distinguished by their names, sartorial style, language and accents - are assigned the jobs nobody else wants, including sweeping the streets, burying the dead and manual scavenging (cleaning human excrement from dry toilets by hand). The estimated 5.5 million Dalits in Bangladesh are among 250 million across south Asia. In neighbouring India a successful civil rights movement has gained political representation for the country's 170 million Dalits, but in Bangladesh

where the former British colonial rulers lured Indian Dalits on the broken promise of better jobs, homes and prospects - they are not only a caste minority, but a religious minority in a predominantly Muslim country. In a nation of Bengali speakers, their Hindi and Telugu mother tongues mean access to education, housing, the justice system and the political arena is severely suppressed. Gabtoli colony sits at the end of a long potholed road, a grey slum stuck on the western edge of the city. Living in a no-man's land of rusty corrugated iron and old bamboo, with no facilities and no privacy, the women of Gabtoli bathe fully clothed at the banks of the Turag - just 200 metres from a large pipe spewing sewage.

In a country where 80% of the population lives on less than \$2 a day, Dalits shoulder the further burden of exclusion and entrenched discrimination. Moni Rani Das raises her hand to shoulder-level when describing the floods in rainy season. "When the rains come it brings snakes and dangerous insects to our home," she says. "We try to get away but the rickshaw pullers and bus drivers won't carry us."

Discrimination

Munni, her husband and three teenagers were moved to this flood-prone colony after developers planning to build apartments evicted them from their central Dhaka home. "We protested," she says, "but the army and police came and said, 'If you don't leave we will beat you and shoot you'."

Proffering a cup of murky chemical-scented water, Munni adds: "There, we had safe water and a market. We were near jobs and my children went to school. Now, school is too far away."

The International Dalit Solidarity Network estimates that 96% of Dalits in



Bangladesh cannot read or write. Dalits say they need political representation from leaders who understand the extent of the problem, but of Dhaka's 90 elected commissioners, not one is Dalit.

Sitting behind his desk, the commissioner for Dhaka's Ward 85, Alhaj Badal Sharda, says: "I love Dalit people because they are sincere and very simple." When a typical Dhaka power cut kills the lights and the fan, one of the commissioner's men hurries to his side, wafting his boss with a giant fan of palm leaves. "I have never seen any discrimination against Dalits in my community," Sharda continues. "I am 100% sure there is no discrimination."

But, born and brought up in the Telugu colony in the commissioner's ward, Prokashamma Bhodanki insists caste discrimination is rife. The 23-year-old daughter of the late BG Murthy, who seven years ago founded the Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights movement, Prokashamma hid her Dalit identity at secondary school by speaking Bangla, each term

Dalit people wash their clothes and bathe in the same place, with no privacy. Photography by: Akbar Abdullah/EPA

taking her Bangla-speaking sister instead of her Telugu-speaking mother to collect her exam results - an event similar to parents' evening at British schools. She recalls: "One time my sister wasn't able to come. When the other students heard my mother speak they said terrible things."

Wiping her tears with her pink shawl, she adds: "For four years I hid my identity from my friends but when they knew I was a Dalit girl they wouldn't eat with me or speak with me. I swore I would never go back to school."

But she did. After finishing her two remaining years, Prokashamma passed her exams and is now teaching English and Bangla to young Dalits. She said: "Now I understand that so many of us are facing that kind of discrimination. I want to fight for my rights and do something for my community and myself."

Prokashamma belongs to a new wave of young Dalit women in Bangladesh who, having sworn against the tide to finish school, are now role models, being elected as leaders in their communities and teaching under the Dalit Women's Forum to give the younger generation a fighting chance.

Launched two years ago, the forum provides training in making and selling candles and garments for its 150 members as a first step to financial independence. Back at her brightly coloured home, forum leader Moni Rani says her father ensured she was the first girl in her community to finish school - and she intends to be the first of many.

"All Dalit women are now conscious of their situation and demanding change," says Moni. "When I was a girl I couldn't get the chances our girls are getting now. Our young women are smarter than me and I feel that is my success. My vision is for hundreds of smart Dalit women coming together and I will gather them under my banner."

Sanitation: 'We need basic hygienic sanitary products'

Puberty poses challenges for any young woman, but the lack of dignity caused by life with no sanitation or privacy can be destructive and debilitating in this proud and private culture. Anaya and Jull, both 17, speak in hushed voices as they ask for their real names not to be reported.

"It is very embarrassing," says Anaya, pointing to a row of blocked dry toilets, some with doors, some without. "Our water system is very poor and we have no money to buy sanitary towels so we use rags from our mothers' old saris, but they are not clean, and it's not hygienic for us. When we go to the toilet we have nowhere to put the rags and we can't put them in the dry toilet so we throw them through a gap in the wall into an open sewer at the back."

"Our culture is very... timid," adds Jull, "and it's very difficult for our

young girls. The older women think it's something we shouldn't talk about. But we need hygienic sanitary products or somewhere to put the old rags; we need a good water supply and we need education for women. Young girls don't know what to do. They are very confused." MG



An ancient hierarchy

The caste system originates from the Hindu creation beliefs that the first man split himself to form four castes from different parts of his body.

The main castes - Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas and Sudras - are determined by birth and may influence a person's status and occupation. Outside this system, the Dalits are descendants of feudal-era outcasts. Within the Dalit "caste" there are around 45 sub-castes, further complicating status and boundaries.

While the caste system originates in Hindu scriptures, there are an unknown number of Christian Dalits in Bangladesh, and the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) claims the practice of discriminating against Dalits has also been adopted by the country's Muslim majority. Many lower-caste Sikhs - whose religion was borne of a rejection of caste hierarchies - also suffer oppression.

Caste discrimination extends beyond south Asia. Caste Watch UK claims the system still has a powerful influence over the lives of millions of Britons of south-Asian origin.

After extensive research, two special rapporteurs of the Human Rights Council have drawn up the first UN framework for the "effective elimination of discrimination based on work and descent".

Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights and the IDSN are now pushing for the government of Bangladesh to use the framework to address the country's caste discrimination crisis. MG

Human rights: Dalit access to politics and justice

Two years ago, in a landslide election, India appointed its first Dalit woman chief minister. Ruling over Uttar Pradesh, India's largest state, Mayawati Kumari has become an inspiration for the republic's 170 million Dalits.

In Bangladesh, however, Dalits are yet to enter the political arena and only in the last 18 months has the country's Dalit population begun to find its voice. A group with growing support, Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR), which this year convened the first national Dalit conference, helped to establish the Dalit Women's Forum (members of whom are pictured right), to fight for female rights and representation.

In July, the Dalit Women's Forum and BDHR took to the streets of Dhaka in a mass protest, claiming a lack of representation in the police force and courts means Dalits are consistently failed by the justice system. They demanded the arrest and trial of the four rapists of a 15-year-old Dalit girl. Parul Das was collecting water when she was abducted, gang raped and dumped in the street.

Another public call to action came after 20-year-old Dalit cleaner Rekha Das was beaten to death after being suspected of stealing a mobile phone.

More than 500 people protested on the streets of Panja, demanding justice be done. Three people have since been charged and a court case opened in October. MG



Education: 'I wanted to give them something to dream about'

Teaching a class of five-year-olds in Gonoktoll colony, 17-year-old Pinky Rani Das recalls her own school days: "One teacher said: 'You Dalits will never be more than cleaners. Dalit people are good for sweeping - they're no good for studying. She said it in front of the whole class and everyone laughed.'"

Last year, Kakoli Rani Das, also 17, was flatly denied further education. "I did well in my exams," she says, "so I filled out a form and took it to the ward commissioner to ask for a scholarship. When he saw me he said, 'I won't sign this. You are a Dalit girl. You are not fit for higher education. I begged him but he refused, ripped it up and threw it away.'"

Kakoli's mother, a sweeper, took out a loan to fund her daughter's education and Kakoli's ambitions have not been dampened. She says: "I want to be the first Dalit police officer. Then, if anyone blames the Dalit, I can protest." As the only girl in her community to finish school, Rina Rani was appointed teacher at the new Dr Ambedkar Dalit pre-school in

Ekrampur colony. She says: "Most of my community doesn't realise the importance of education. I started teaching because I wanted to give them something to dream about."

Rina, 25, claims children who, six months ago, wanted to be cleaners and street sweepers now want to be engineers and lawyers. Sitting on her mother's knee, Rina's five-year-old daughter, beams: "I want to be a doctor." MG

Teacher Rina Rani and her daughter

