

Universal Periodic Review: Bangladesh

4th UPR session February 2009

Caste-based discrimination and human rights in Bangladesh

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In Bangladesh, caste-based discrimination is estimated to affect between 3.5 to 5.5 million Dalits. In Bangladesh, members of the “low castes” increasingly refer to themselves as Dalits - the “downtrodden” people - to emphasise the fact that they have been exploited, oppressed and excluded through generations. Dalits are perceived as a broader category of people which include regional and local variations distinguishable by profession, e.g. robidas (cobblers) rishis (leather workers), shobdokars (drum beaters), etc. Caste systems and prejudice against so-called “untouchables” are traditionally regarded as part of Hindu culture and certainly originate in Hindu scriptures; but in Bangladesh these traditions and practices have also been adopted by sections of the Muslim majority. Hindu and Muslim Dalits share a number of problems and challenges but also differ in some respects. The Hindus suffer double discrimination as members of a religious minority in the Muslim nation as well as because of low status within their own communities.

Political, economic and social exclusion of the Dalit community is practised over the entire country. Overtly visible segregation and denial of access to public spaces utilized or occupied by non-Dalits illustrate the depth to which casteism is engrained within the socio-economic and political fabric of Bangladeshi society. Social exclusion is manifested in the physical structure of both rural and urban areas throughout the country. In terms of status of education, most Dalits have no formal education. In terms of equal access to employment, a large number of Dalits are employed in the public/private sector as sweepers and cleaners with very low pay. Since they are considered ‘unclean’ in society, they live separately from other so called ‘clean’ groups in their own neighbourhoods; a circumstance exacerbated by the GoB’s rule of housing in a particular locality. Dalits are not allowed to rent or build houses outside these designated localities. They are regularly denied entry to the temples and religious activities of non-Dalits, to tea shops and restaurants, to houses of non-Dalits, etc. They sometimes also face severe forms of human rights violations, including abduction, rape, torture, destruction of houses, land grabbing, eviction from land, threats and intimidation.

Over the last few years, there has been an increasing focus and state recognition of the situation of Dalits in Bangladesh. The new Government authorities of Bangladesh have invited civil society to discuss the UPR review, and has generally adopted an inclusive and participatory process towards the Dalit community. The Dalit movement managed to raise their demands in run-up to the national elections in December 2008, and the establishment of the new National Human Rights Commission also brings opportunities for increased attention to this issue. Yet, the widespread practice of discrimination, segregation and untouchability practices continue to impair fundamental human rights of the Dalit community in Bangladesh. The endorsing organisations therefore urge the new Government to effectively address this human rights issue and implement affirmative action programmes to ensure equal access and opportunities to all in the country.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. The Government of Bangladesh should enact specific laws and implement special measures that prohibit discrimination against Dalits to rectify and acknowledge the serious human rights situation facing this group.
2. The Government of Bangladesh should declare the practice of ‘untouchability’ in public and private places a punishable crime, using model legal acts from other caste affected countries (e.g. India and Nepal).
3. To promote the socio-economic status of Dalits and other excluded groups in Bangladesh, the Government should form a special Dalit Commission or create a special cell in the newly formed National Human Rights Commission to oversee the affairs of Dalit and other excluded groups.
4. The Government of Bangladesh should include disaggregated data on caste and pay adequate attention to affected communities in all assessments, including data collation, planning, and implementation of any human rights, development and humanitarian programmes.
5. To promote the status of Dalit women, a special cell in the Children and Women Affairs Ministry and in local level government bodies should be created for the development of the Dalit community. Land rights for women should also be ensured.
6. A quota for cleaners’ jobs in the municipality should be reserved for Dalits, as this group has limited scope of getting other jobs. Job quotas should also be reserved in government and non-government services.
7. In Dalit colonies (in the City Corporation and municipalities), land rights should be allotted permanently to Dalit inhabitants, and Dalits should be allowed to buy land owned by the government (khas).
8. Free primary health care, primary education opportunities, allowances for the elderly, sufficient levels of electricity, gas and water supply should be provided to people living in these villages and colonies.
9. Dalit activists and organisations should be properly recognized by the Government.
10. Dalit representatives should be included in all committees of political parties at national and local level.

The recommendations are prepared by the Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM), Nagorik Uddyog and International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) on the basis of the Joint NGO Submission on caste-based discrimination in Bangladesh. This report is referred to in the summary of stakeholders’ report (A/HRC/WG.6/4/BGD/3) in paragraphs 6, 10, 12, 13, 38, 43 and 54.

The submission is based on first-hand information from a national research project on caste-based discrimination in Bangladesh, which was conducted as part of a regional study in South Asia. The regional study on caste-based discrimination in South Asia was undertaken by the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in association with IDSN. The responsible country researcher in Bangladesh was Prof. Iftekhar Uddin Chowdhury from the University of Chittagong. The studies can be downloaded from IDSN’s website: www.idsn.org

MORE INFORMATION

Nagorik Uddyog (Citizens’ Initiative): www.nuhr.org
Mr. Zakir Hossain: nu@bdmail.net

Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM)
Mr. Milan Das: nu@bdmail.net

International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN): www.idsn.org
Ms. Rikke Nöhrliind, Coordinator: rn@idsn.org