

Consultative Meeting
on
the Situation of Dalits in Bangladesh

18 October 2006
Dhaka, Bangladesh

Summary



In memory of Mr. B.G. Murthy

It was with great sadness and shock that the information of the sudden death of Mr. BG Murthy, the late President of Bangladesh Dalit Human Rights (BDHR), was received on 24 October 2006 - less than one week after the conduction of the consultative meeting. As the founder and President of BDHR, Mr. Murthy was a leading figure in the Dalit movement in Bangladesh. His efforts to promote and seek recognition of Dalits rights in Bangladesh were unique; he worked tirelessly to bring awareness to the cause in a national as well as international context. The sudden demise of Mr. Murthy is a great loss to his family and friends, to BDHR and the Dalit movement in Bangladesh, as well as to colleagues and friends in the Dalit movement worldwide.

Background

The consultative meeting was organised by Bangladesh Dalits' Human Rights (BDHR) in cooperation with the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN). The consultation brought together approximately 70 persons from civil society organisations in Bangladesh, including Dalit leaders, Dalit organisations and representatives of international NGOs, as well as researchers and journalists. The meeting was the first of its kind gathering a range of stakeholders concerned with Dalit issues covering the four regions of Bangladesh. Research findings and case studies presented as well as plenary and group discussions provided solid documentation on the various forms of discrimination practised against Dalits in both Hindu and Muslim communities.

The purpose of the meeting was to share information; explore initiatives to address the current dismal situation of Dalits in Bangladesh; and discuss ways forward to eradicate discrimination against Dalits, including ways to enhance and link national and international level advocacy for the rights of Dalits in Bangladesh.

BDHR was established in 2002 by progressive Dalits who acknowledged the need to promote Dalit rights in Bangladesh. BDHR acts as a network of Dalits and it facilitates, among other things, communication between Dalit communities and the government, with the aim of including Dalit perspectives in national development programmes and policies. IDSN is an international network advocating and lobbying for the elimination of caste-based discrimination globally.

Prof. Chin-Sung Chung, one of two United Nations Special Rapporteurs conducting a study on discrimination based on work and descent (caste-based discrimination) under the UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, participated in the meeting.

Tracing the history of caste-based discrimination in Bangladesh

Bangladesh has a population of 140 million people and it is one of the least developed countries in the world. There is an estimated 5.5 million Dalits living in 63 districts in Bangladesh although numbers vary much according to different sources. Most Dalits in Bangladesh are descendants of immigrants from South India. In the 1830s, Dalits were brought to Bangladesh by the British colonial regime to provide menial services for them. Most Dalits are Hindus and some are Christians, and they mainly speak in Hindi, Telegu, Urdu, Jabbalpuri and Bangla. The Bengali culture is pre-dominated by Hindu and Buddhist heritage along with Muslim traditions brought to the region by Muslim missionaries and Arab traders.

The Hindus of Bangladesh are divided into various upper, lower and scheduled caste groups. These groups are internally homogeneous but heterogeneous to each other, and arranged in a hierarchical order. Although Bangladesh is primarily a Muslim country, a caste-like system has developed among Muslims as the result of close contact with Hindu culture. The Muslim community in Bangladesh has inherited the traits of both their Hindu and Muslim forefathers and caste prejudices have left their mark on this stratification today. Like dominant caste Hindus, foreign Muslims (e.g. Arabs, Persians, and Afghans) and their descendents used to consider it degrading to accept menial service or to do agricultural work. Muslims are broadly divided into two castes, Ashraf (high caste) and Ajlaf (low caste). Muslims in Bengal organize their society according to social strata called "Quoms", where division of labour is granted by birth, rather than by economic status. Professions perceived as "lowly" are provided to people of certain ostracized Quoms and higher Quoms get professions perceived as superior. The Quoms are rigidly segregated with little or no intermarriage or cohabitation.

Caste Discrimination today

Caste-based discrimination in Bangladesh includes practices of untouchability imposed by the dominant caste of both Hindu and Muslim communities, such as denial of access to upper caste/Muslim houses, temples, and

restaurants/teashops. Dalits face discrimination in employment, housing, education, and access to basic services. The social exclusion of Dalits is manifested in the physical structure of the villages throughout the country. Social and economic interactions of Dalits are mostly restricted by religion, caste and occupation. Like in other caste-affected countries, Dalits in Bangladesh are referred to professions which are considered impure such as sweeping, sewerage cleaning, tea garden laboring, burying of dead bodies, processing of mastered oil, gardening, shoe and leather work, drum beating, washing, etc. Social boycott and forced labor are often imposed on Dalits as a means to control and exploit their labor.

Dalits in Bangladesh are heavily affected by various forms of discriminatory practises both in the private and public sphere. Practises of untouchability are experienced in places like schools, markets, hotels/restaurants and hospitals. In public places, Dalits are regarded with contempt by other communities and treated as untouchables. For example, Dalits are never invited by other communities to participate in public events.

Most Dalits are landless and deprived of access to basic services that are required for a dignified standard of living. Dalits live in segregated habitations and they experience an urgent need for adequate shelter and sanitation facilities. The most discriminated castes are living in a polluted environment either in public housing (“colonies”) provided by the municipality or City Corporation, or in the slums in and around the urban centers and in rural areas of the country. The densely populated and congested housing situation is a desperate sign of the inadequate living conditions. Furthermore, evictions and shifting of housing by the City Corporation, often as a result of land-grabbing, are commonly practised, and leave Dalits without homes.

Dalits have limited access to health care facilities mainly due to financial constraints. Consequently, malnutrition and other diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, TB, and pneumonia are common among Dalits, resulting in a high number of deaths due to lack of medical treatment.

Dalits hit an absolute low in terms of education and vocational training. The illiteracy rate among Dalits is dismal; it is estimated that only 5% of the Dalits can read and write. Moreover, most schools are not easily accessible to Dalits; Dalit students encounter discriminatory behaviour from other students; and education may also for various reasons be neglected by their parents. There are all factors leading to a low access rate and a high drop out rate.

The enjoyment of cultural rights, such as the right to practise one’s own culture and language, has been identified as a key concern and a form of discrimination against Dalits. Whereas most Dalits in Bangladesh do not speak Bangla as their first language, they are commonly denied their right to get education in their mother tongue.

In formal employment, various forms of discriminatory practises exist, e.g. discrimination in public service rules and wages. In addition, the diminishing number of jobs available for Dalits as sweepers and sanitation workers results in lower income and an increased poverty level. The almost complete lack of alternative employment opportunities coupled with a lack of safety net programs and government development programs targeting Dalits make them extremely vulnerable and economically deprived.

Limited access to power, politics and decision making constitute a reality for Dalits in Bangladesh; denial of the freedom of speech, the right to public participation, discrimination in voting rights are common forms of discrimination experienced by Dalits. The limitation in access to such fundamental rights is a result of repression by dominant-caste communities and local authorities; equally the lack of means of redress, i.e. access to legal remedies and human rights mechanisms, is affecting people’s right to political participation and a fair legal process.

In conclusion, Dalit communities are among the most economically marginalized and socially excluded groups in Bangladesh due to the practices of caste discrimination. Their situation is further aggravated by the intense

population pressure and a complete lack of institutionalized support for employment and education. It is also clear that Dalits are being denied a range of rights with little or no attention by the duty bearers.

Discrimination against Dalits: Barriers and solutions

The participants of the consultative meeting identified key barriers and solutions to overcome the deeply rooted forms of discrimination in Bangladesh. Illiteracy, social division or lack of unity within Dalit communities were identified as key factors, as well as lack of awareness and social stigma as an underlying factor influencing the mind-set of Dalits.

The Constitution of Bangladesh provides equal rights for all people irrespective of race, caste, creed, and religion, yet Dalits are still socially excluded and repressed by dominant caste people in both Hindu and Muslim communities. Discrimination must be addressed through legislation, enforcement of law and special policy measures. Access to legal remedies and human rights mechanisms should be provided to ensure, among other things, Dalits' right to political participation and a fair legal process.

Lack of adequate statistics, i.e. disaggregated data on population (gender and caste), education, employment, housing, health, income, etc. was identified as a key barrier. The general perception, that caste discrimination does not exist in Bangladesh, and limited awareness on the side of the Government, form part of the problem. Provision of data and analyses on the situation of Dalits would be a first step in addressing discrimination and exclusion; and in ensuring that Dalits are fully included in government development programmes. Although, for example, the Poverty Reduction Strategy Policy 2005 acknowledges that caste-based discrimination exists in the country, development programmes are still not designed to take special measures to protect and support Dalits.

Participants expressed particular concerns related to the need for increased awareness and more research on the situation of Dalits. Awareness on discrimination against Dalits is low, not only among political decision-makers, but also among NGOs. A comparatively small number of human rights and development NGOs make efforts to include Dalits in their programmes.

As key recommendations for promoting and securing the rights of Dalits, the participants stressed the importance of working together to create a unified platform for action and to secure in-depth research and documentation. Professor Chowdhury presented information about a comprehensive research project he will be conducting in cooperation with the Indian Institute of Dalit Studies (IIDS) in India. The research project will examine the nature and extent of untouchability, descent-based discrimination and social exclusion in contemporary rural Bangladesh; it will identify critical areas of concern and hopefully point out possible ways forward in the struggle to eliminate discrimination against Dalits in Bangladesh.

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