

## *Original Paper*

# A Study of the Condition of Dalit in Contemporary

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Received: April 19, 2024

Accepted: May 15, 2024

Online Published: May 29, 2024

doi:10.22158/ape.v7n2p187

URL: <http://dx.doi.org/10.22158/ape.v7n2p187>

### **Abstract**

*Dalit are one of the important minorities and have a significant impact on community relations within the country. Historically, they have suffered from a long history of unequal social discrimination. In order to escape stigmatization and improve their social status, Dalit have been engaged in a series of human rights struggles in recent times. However, Dalit continue to face unfair experiences to this day. Based on the existing literature, this paper presents the current situation of Dalit in and the initiatives taken by various sections of the society to improve the situation of Dalit.*

### **Keywords**

*Dalit, Protect Human Rights*

## **1. Introduction**

In the modernization process of Bangladesh, Dalit have played an important role in the economic and social development of the country. However, they are one of the most marginalized and socially excluded groups in Bangladesh. This has to do with the fact that historically they have been stigmatized for a long time. A long history of unequal treatment and Hindu nationalist movements led Dalit in Bangladesh to embark on a path of struggle for social equality and against caste-based discrimination through a series of social reforms and anti-caste movements. However, the situation of Dalit in Bangladesh at the bottom of the social ladder will not change for a long time due to the far-reaching impact of the caste system in Bangladesh.

## **2. Why Was Dalit Stigmatized?**

Located in eastern South Asia, much of Bangladesh is a low-lying delta where four major rivers meet, and high mountains in the north and east block easy access to East and South-East Asia, drawing the country towards Indian civilization. Although Bangladesh is culturally and politically marginalized from the Indian perspective, it is this marginalization that has allowed Indian culture to be preserved in

the Bengal region over time. (Annapurna, 2022) The unequal treatment of Dalit can be traced as far back as ancient India, where they were stigmatized in early Hindu classical writings. Stigmatization can be understood as the process of dehumanizing, demeaning, discrediting and devaluing people in certain population groups based on a sense of disgust. (BDERM & Nagorik, 2018)

The earliest appellation of the Dalit was Dasa or Chandals . After the Aryans entered the South Asian subcontinent, they referred to the natives of India as Dasa or Chandals. The Dasa were the main indigenous opponents of the Aryans in their wars of expansion, and they were dark-skinned and flat-faced, unlike the fair-skinned and well-defined appearance of the Aryans. They are also commonly referred to as Dasyu in early Hindu scriptures such as the Vedas. Varna was the foundation of social structure and society in pre-colonial India. The religious, economic, political and social life of an individual was shaped by the Varna in which he was born. When he was born in a particular Varna, he had established his rights and responsibilities. And he could hardly change his Varna. Moreover, the Upanishads, composed around 800-600 B.C.E., also create hatred against untouchables by equating them with dogs and claiming that Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas are born in comfortable wombs while Chandras are born in foul-smelling wombs, fundamentally labeling Chandras as impure. Under this influence, the Dalit were restricted to the dirtiest of jobs, and even stepping on their shadows was considered polluted. As a result of this, Dalit are confined to the dirtiest of jobs and even stepping on their shadow is considered polluted.

Most Dalit migrated to Bangladesh in the 1830s from southern India, where their ancestors had been brought by the British colonial government to provide them with menial services. Most Dalit are Hindu, some Christian, and speak mainly Hindi, Telugu, Urdu, Jabalpuri and Bengali. Like other caste-affected groups, Dalit have always been seen as belonging to a lower caste and an excluded section of society, and are often forced to perform specific types of labor, most commonly associated with the occupation of “Jat cleaner”. Due to limited job opportunities, Dalits are almost exclusively employed in the service sector. In urban areas, they can only engage in unclean work, such as sweeping streets, manual cleaning and burying corpses. Many Dalit are stigmatized due to occupational and experiential segregation and social exclusion. During the British colonial period, almost all Dalit worked as sweepers and cleaners. However, due to unfavorable government policies, bureaucracy and non-cooperation of the concerned authorities, Dalit started losing their jobs, which intensified the suffering of this vulnerable group.

L.S.S. O'Malley, an early English historian, defined the Dalit movement as a movement for the advancement of untouchability initiated and sustained by others. (Deepak & Ritika, 2020) Its main aim was to gain social, religious and economic equality and to get rid of the untouchability imposed by the Brahmins. It originated from the helplessness of the lower caste people of Hindu society due to their domination and dispossession by the upper caste Hindu Brahmins. At that time, social reforms and anti-caste movements were reaching out to the middle class peasantry and the national movement was beginning to develop a strong mass base.

### **3. Situation of Dalit in Contemporary Bengal**

The Dalit resistance struggle began as early as the 19th century, but until today, the Bengali Dalit remain the poorest class in the country. The basics of shelter, food, water, etc., are not adequately provided in Dalit colonies. In rural Bangladesh, 89% of Dalit use public toilets and most have no roofs. In urban Dalit colonies, an average of 84 people share a water point while every 40 people use a toilet. (Deepak & Sudeshna, 2020) They also do not have proper health care facilities, and despite the provision of advanced health care facilities by the local authorities, Dalit are unable to access these facilities due to financial constraints. As a result, malnutrition and other diseases such as diarrhea, cholera, tuberculosis, pneumonia, etc. are common among Dalit and many die every year due to lack of medical care. Encountering discrimination is also an injustice for Dalit in purchasing medicines. According to statistics, 21 % of Dalit face discrimination in obtaining medicines from hospitals. (Heitzman & Worden, 1989) In terms of access to education, there are no schools for Dalit and therefore most Dalit children do not have access to education in their mother tongue. It is reported that less than 30 % of Dalit children are attending school. The illiteracy rate among Dalit is alarming; it is estimated that only 5 % of Dalit can read and write. (L.S.S.O'Malley, 1968) In addition to this, various forms of discrimination are widespread in the surrounding communities. In the public sphere, Dalit are “socially hated” by other communities and they are considered untouchables. Dalit are never invited by other communities to participate in public events. There are sacred or religious places that remain inaccessible to Dalit.

In addition, Dalit lacks political empowerment and is not representative of political parties at all levels, making it impossible to seek political security. According to a 2014 study, 94% of Dalit did not join any political parties, and 4% of Dalit joined local political parties, but did not play any decision-making role. Although 99 % of Dalit have the right to vote, 8% of them have been harassed while exercising their right to vote. 91% of Dalit stated that they or their family members have never participated in local government elections. (IDSN, 2000) The lack of reliable and disaggregated data is a major factor in the continuing obstacles faced by Dalit in gaining political representation, accessing public services and securing employment. In many cases, they are discriminated against because they are a religious minority. It is estimated that Dalit constitute only 70 per cent of the Hindu population of Bangladesh. In terms of legal protection for Dalit, Bangladesh is still yet to introduce a minority-specific domestic legal regime. Minorities themselves are not recognized under the current constitutional framework, which provides them with minimal protection through universally applicable rights such as equal treatment, non-discrimination and dignity. In Bangladesh, the culture of denial of the existence of minorities is so deeply entrenched that minorities experience multiple forms of violence, which can be broadly categorized as political and social discrimination, legal oppression, cultural and religious repression, and organized mass torture. After a long struggle by Dalit and human rights organizations, the Bangladesh Law Commission drafted the Anti-Discrimination Bill 2015 and submitted it to the Law Ministry. However, the government was slow to respond and returned it to the National Human Rights Commission India (NHRC) for revision in 2018. In April 2019, the NHRC again submitted a revised

version to the ministry, but has yet to receive a response. (IDSN, 2019) In addition, with the growing size of the city, the Dalit colony is also facing the problem of temporary relocation and resettlement. In 2013, the government planned to build 1,148 apartments for sweepers in Dhaka city. In 2018, the municipal corporation issued a notice to the residents of the colony asking them to temporarily relocate their houses (with compensation) to allow for the construction of the building. However, of the 2,000 Dalit families in the colony, only 150 work for the Dhaka South City Corporation, and many of the residents will be left homeless if the project is implemented. (Islam & Parvez, 2013)

The Dalit community experiences multiple forms of social, political and economic discrimination, and their plight violates Bangladesh's fundamental human rights obligations. Although Dalit are considered citizens of the country, their continued stigmatization due to their caste and occupational status may render them defacto stateless. Based on the current plight of Dalit, contemporary Dalit activists and Dalit abroad have begun to seek international help, while also actively pushing for the establishment of national-level Dalit protection institutions and platforms that seek to eliminate caste-based discrimination, pay more attention to the betterment of the lives of the underclass, and seek the equality and social security that all Dalit deserve.

Among the UN bodies and mechanisms in which Dalit activists have sought to participate, two have been at the forefront of UN activities: the former UN Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights and the UN Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), which is the monitoring body for the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination (ICERD) of 1965. CERD is the supervisory body of ICERD in 1965. (Ram, 2019) CERD internationally recognizes caste discrimination as a human rights issue and as an international human rights treaty. human rights issue and as a violation of international human rights treaties. In addition to the protection of human rights initiatives by the United Nations, there also exist international platforms and organizations formed by Dalit activists, such as The International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN), which was established in 2000. The IDSN, which aims to advocate for Dalit human rights and raise national and international awareness of Dalit issues, is a network of international human rights groups, development agencies, the European National Dalit Solidarity Network (ENDSN), and national platforms in caste-affected countries. The members of the Platform have successfully lobbied for an action-oriented approach to addressing human rights abuses against “untouchables” and other similar groups of Dalit or those discriminated against on the basis of work and descent, mainly through engagement with the United Nations, the European Union and other multilateral institutions.

There is also the Asian Dalit Rights Forum (ADRF), formally established in 2014, which is a platform based on the contiguity of countries in the South Asian region and the commonality of discrimination and violence suffered by people living in the region, and which primarily conducts field investigations on issues of caste-based discrimination and violence that have a significant impact on the countries concerned or on the region as a whole, and follows up with national and regional and international

government interventions, advocacy and lobbying for the protection of Dalit human rights in their respective national governance institutions and regional political organizations and bodies. It focuses on conducting field investigations on issues of caste-based discrimination and violence that have a significant impact in the countries concerned or in the South Asian and Asian region as a whole, and follows up with national, regional and international governmental interventions, as well as advocacy and lobbying for the protection of Dalit human rights in the governing bodies of their respective countries, regional political organizations and institutions, among others.

In addition, Dalit activists have helped to engage national and international agencies at the grass-roots level by providing relevant information, data analysis and fact-finding on individual cases of human rights violations. In the case of Bangladesh, the number of Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) has increased dramatically since independence, and they have played an active role in almost every area of governance. Examples include Citizen's Initiative (Nagorik Uddyog, hereafter NU) and Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM). Since its establishment in 1995, the former has worked to raise awareness among the general public about the basic human rights of the people on the one hand, and to build the capacity of the people to pursue and realize these rights on the other hand, working to provide conditions conducive for the people to build institutions and mobilize themselves. It has supported Dalit-led civil society organizations and individuals in their struggles and campaigns for the realization of their rights and entitlements, helped organize the formation of BDERM and its international recognition and support, and supported their cause and advocacy at the United Nations level, as well as specific interventions for other marginalized human rights rights, such as for the indigenous peoples of the plains of Bengal and linguistic minorities. The latter, BDERM, a national platform of Dalit-led civil society organizations aiming to build an egalitarian society free from caste-based discrimination, has been campaigning at the national and international levels since its inception. Currently, 11 Dalit-led NGOs are members of this platform, with about 2,000 individual members. Since its establishment, BDERM has been working in 56 districts of Bangladesh: organizing the first Dalit Resource Conference, submitting the Dalit Human Rights Report to the United Nations Human Rights Council, and becoming a member of the Human Rights Forum of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) Bangladesh in October 2008, among others. At the same time, BDERM is also a member of IDSN and ADRF, and the organization's leaders have been active in uniting international forces to promote the protection of Dalit rights and interests. However, limitations have increased over time, and their ability to intervene has been restricted by regulations.

In general, civil society groups and NGOs in Bangladesh have played a very good role. These mechanisms and special procedures set up when Bangladesh submits a progress report on the human rights situation in the country. Since civil society organizations and non-governmental organizations can also submit their own relevant reports, they can not only play a role in balancing and ensuring that the government further assumes responsibility, but also put forward useful suggestions on the

implementation of treaty tasks and disseminate information in the community.

In recent years, the Government of Bangladesh has also developed initiatives to promote the social and economic development of Dalit. In 2012, the Prime Minister issued a directive calling for special measures to integrate Dalit communities into social safety net programs, enhance food security, and allocate funds for housing. The 2014 National Social Protection Strategy of Bangladesh commits to eliminating social and economic discrimination through legislative and other measures, including access to basic services such as education, health, nutrition, family planning, and water and sanitation. In FY 2012-13, the government made specific allocations for scholarships, income generating training, and social security, including an allocation of more than BDT 6 million for old age and maternity benefits for Dalit. At present, the relief measures to improve Dalit's situation have the phenomenon of unfair distribution and corruption when welfare relief is caused by lack of effective supervision.

#### 4.

Overall, the Dalit movement, whether colonial or contemporary, is a revolt of the Dalit against the stigmatization and unfair treatment they have long suffered under caste-based discrimination, with the aim of restoring the self-respect of the Dalit and their equal treatment in the society, and to establish a new social order based on fraternity, freedom, social justice and social, economic and cultural development of the Dalit. For these people, who have long been victimized by social discrimination and the caste system, Dalit does not mean low caste or poor, but is a constant reminder of the deplorable group of people they have been reduced to as a result of age-old social practices, and it also expresses their aspirations for change and revolution. Despite the efforts of Dalit activists at home and abroad and of the Government of Bangladesh to address the plight of Dalit and to improve their basic conditions of life, the road to freedom and equality for Dalit in Bangladesh is still a long one, based on the fact that the caste system is still deeply entrenched in Bengali society and that Dalit are discriminated against on the basis of their caste and occupation.

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