

Dalits Struggle to Change Livelihood Strategies against Caste-Based Discrimination: A Study in Urban Bangladesh

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to bring forth the Dalits' voice against the caste-based discrimination to change their livelihood strategies. It analyses the ongoing efforts of Dalit movement and its impact on achieving equality, freedom and social justice. To meet these goals, the study draws observation and in-depth interviews with the members of the Dalit community. Previous study findings show that caste-based discrimination is the core cause of Dalits struggle. Dalits are still facing social problems owing to the stigma of untouchability and low-caste, despite the constitutional provisions against caste-based discrimination. Despite the continuous struggles of the Dalit, they have played a vital role in making them aware of their access to opportunities and social rights, but it has not brought fundamental changes in their socio-political status. So, some ready and effective measure are necessary to show this discrimination or human right issues and implement affirmative action programs to make sure equal access to opportunities for them.

Keywords: *Dalit, Struggle, Subtle, Caste, Empowerment, Exclusion.*

Introduction

The human rights issue of the Dalit community wasn't widely discussed and recognised in Bangladesh since independence. However, it drew the attention of some of the national civil society organizations when Dalits in Bangladesh began mobilizing and raising their voices (Uddyog, 2017).

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Historically, oppression has been and continues to be a serious issue of concern worldwide in both developed and underdeveloped countries (Kamen, 2004). Built on an anti-caste plank, the Dalit have moved beyond the framework of caste and, now, represents a symbol of change. It is a struggle for challenging the hegemony of the upper castes. It is not a caste, but an identity of the oppressed people. Dalit identity not merely expresses who Dalits are, but also conveys their aspirations, struggle for change and revolution (NCDHR, 2013). As a South Asian country, the structure of Bangladeshi society, with its hierarchies and power structures, is an ideal place to better understand the experience of caste-based discrimination and oppression.

Dalits are a very distinct social group in the caste-ridden Hindu society. They are the victims of social disabilities and oppression. Economically, most of them are still the poorest of the poor (Mandal, 2014). Although the Constitution of Bangladesh promises equal rights for all of its citizens, thousands of members of the Dalit community are treated as 'untouchables' and are ostracised by the society. The equal rights for all citizens and prohibition of discrimination by the State on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth is guaranteed in article 28(1) of our Constitution. The principle of non-discrimination is also enshrined in other constitutional provisions. Despite these Constitutional guarantees, political-economic-and-social-exclusion on the basis of caste is practiced across the country. As such, social exclusion is manifested in the physical structure of both rural and urban areas throughout the country (Khan, 2016). Due to some affirmative actions, Dalits have made a significant progress on almost all parameters in the 45 years of independence. However, they are not empowered enough to face the challenges of competing equality. In a study, it was revealed that reveals that the backwardness of the Dalits will be evident from their illiteracy, unemployment, dependence on agriculture, and social segregation (Karade, 2008). In terms of residence, housing, poverty and health conditions, the conditions of the Dalits is precarious. All these issues have historically been

related to Dalit deprivation and marginal status in society. So, more than two decades of implementations of these struggles have severely affected the welfare and development of Dalits. In this paper, the researcher attempts to examine the magnitude and direction of the impact of these Dalits' voices against caste-based discrimination on their livelihood, which seriously affected the socio-economic conditions of Dalits in terms of education, occupation, political rights, social justice and other welfare programmes.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives are as follows:

- To explore the Dalit experience in terms of economic, personal, and social struggle.
- To find out whether the social and economic statuses among the Dalit people in Bangladesh are changing.
- To investigate the challenges and the responsible factors for the improvement of the status of the Dalit.
- To provide practical recommendations to enhance social inclusion of Dalits into the mainstream society.

Methodology

The study conducted from January to May 2018 in three greater thanas (sub-districts) namely Hazaribag, Sutrapur and Demra in Dhaka city. These places have been inhabited by the majority of Dalit population. The study have been applied multiple methods like field observation and semi-structural interviews. The selections of the methods based on the context of the research are age, gender, social and cultural background of the participants. To meet these goals of study, the study goes through twenty-two qualitative interviews with the members of the Dalit community. The informants selected through a purposive sampling method where the researcher deliberately chose the informants who were socially and politically conscious. The reason behind choosing the informants from this background was to bring forth the voice of the conscious Dalit

population against a long-standing practice of caste-based discrimination in the Bangladeshi society. To complete an interview, the researcher met at least two or three times with carefully selected household members. Besides, the in-depth interview, personal observations were noted during the fieldwork. Sometimes the researcher spent hours chatting with the Dalits and collected in-depth information about them. In addition to the primary research data, interviewers have also used secondary data from different government, scholars and non-government research and reports on the issue.

Theoretical Framework

In this article, the researcher attempts to make a conceptual framework to the study of the Dalit's struggle against the caste-based discrimination and changing their livelihood strategies in Bangladesh. In order to understand and explain the struggles and adaptation process of Dalit in Bangladesh, here the researcher used the theory of empowerment and subalternity.

Theory of Empowerment

Empowerment is a value-oriented process that enables the targeted group to be aware of social realities and enhances their understanding the consequences of social realities (Sadan, 2004). It is also a major agent of social change with its inherent principle of uplifting people from previous status to a better position. It carries the pervasive social values to strengthen individuals and make people aware about social influence, political power and legal rights. It is a "multilevel construct applicable to individual citizens as well as the organizations and neighbourhoods"; it suggests the study of people in context" (Rappaport, 1987). So it has discussed the concept of empowerment to enable understanding of motivations and experiences of Dalit struggle against inequality. Here, empowerment is understood as a peoples' desire for gaining control over their lives' issues.

Theory of Subaltern

The notion of subalternity is often used to indicate relations of class, lack of political organization and representation or the historical positions of those of "the inferior rank" especially in the post-colonial context (Arnold, 1984; Brennan, 2001; 2006). The term subaltern suggests a group of people who are in lower rank in a society and they become a subject to the hegemony of ruling class people and cannot build up their own history (Gramsci, 1971). The subaltern theorists "stand together again to secure a better future for subaltern peoples, learning to hear them, allowing them to speak, talking back to powers that marginalise them, documenting their past" (Ludden, 2002). Subalternity brings awareness to the marginalized and makes them able to subvert unequal socio-political hierarchy. Hence, both issues, empowerment and subalternity, are worthy to deal with the Dalits as member of lower caste to bring social changes in Bangladesh.

Forms of Changing Livelihood Strategies

The major subject of Dalit struggle is directed towards gaining caste-based equality and socio-political empowerment. Almost all the informants meant that they were oppressed by state policies and were excluded from mainstream national development agendas due to their lower caste. Similarly, they were suffering from the vicious circle of poverty over many generations and equally facing inhuman behaviour from so-called high caste people. Now a researcher tries to give a picture the rise of Dalits voice against caste based inequality which impacts their livelihood strategies in Bangladesh in the following discussion.

Gaining Education

Education is the most important pre-requisite for achieving the goals of personal, social, political, economic and cultural development. In other words, education is the most effective instrument for meeting the challenges that Dalits are facing. Historical evidences in this

regard indicate that Dalit community has been excluded from the whole process of education since centuries (Mandal, 2014). Although Article 15 & 17 of the Bangladesh Constitution stipulates that the State will provide free and compulsory primary education to all children. However, owing to reservation and affirmative action in the arena of education, substantial progress has been made in the field of education of Dalits during the last few decades. They also mentioned that the acceptance of their children in schools is gradually increasing. At present, most of the parents want to send their children to school. Similarly, Dalits have been more aware in gaining education and they want to send their children to school as one respondent said:

"A significant progress has been made in our community within a few decades. Vast inequalities were existed within the education system in the past. Education is not available for lower caste people. Our older generation has expressed their dissatisfaction and frustration how in the past, it had been difficult for them to get admission for their children in nearby mainstream schools, be it private or public. Now, I am proud that I am a student in a government college."

Dalit community is facing caste-based discrimination in educational institutions. In schools, Dalit children face the discrimination by teachers and peers directly and indirectly (Bishwakarma, 2011). In this context, Dalit children also face discrimination and discouragement from mainstream ethnic group members who perceive education for Dalit as both a waste and a threat. As a result of their discriminatory treatment, large numbers of Dalit children drop out of school, especially in the early elementary stages. Notwithstanding, Dalit children faced caste discrimination from their fellow students and teachers. One of my informants captured this in the following terms:

"When I admitted in a school, my teachers did not teach me properly and the classmates' behaviour towards me was also horrible. Mainstream children were not being seated with me or

did not share their food with me because 'I was untouchable'. However, I know that some of my community children are very intelligent, but sometimes they don't get the opportunity to go to school for these discriminatory actions. In the past, when they tried to go to school, the school doors were closed to them. This is now better in urban areas, but sometimes still the case in rural areas. Now some of them go to school, college, even university, but they don't honestly say: 'I am Dalit.' They say: 'We are Hindu'."

Dalit children do not have access or the opportunity to attend high-cost and presumably 'good-quality' private schools. These schools are primarily located in urban areas and are therefore, not accessible to the larger part of Dalit children. In addition to that, the tuition fees are so high that they are not affordable to the vast majority of the Dalits. For Dalits, the question is not whether the Dalits can afford to send their children to private schools, but whether they can afford to send their children to school at all (Jameela Pedecini, 2011). Similarly, one of my respondents told this in the following terms:

"It is not possible to send our children into good quality private school. One of the causes is good quality schools are located in exclusive areas and they have not allowed us in these areas and the other cause is tuition fees are high in these schools. So, our children are generally enrolled in Arts and humanities, it becomes difficult for them to meet the job requirements of the multinational corporations or others."

The Government has taken initiatives to protect various disadvantaged groups from discrimination and stigmatization. Some of them have been provided with reserved quotas for their employment in the public sector and in educational institutions. Public universities have introduced quotas for Dalits to gain access to higher education. In 2013-14 academic year, Dhaka University introduced quota for Dalits for the first time. In the academic year 2016-17, 8 more universities followed suit and introduced quotas for Dalit students (Hussain, 2017). It also reveals that there has been

substantial increase in the enrolment of children belonging to the Dalits at all stages. So reservation in the educational institutions and the financial assistance in the form of scholarships constitute perhaps the most important factor in the development scheme for Dalits (George, 2013). As opportunities for education increase and aspirations rise, Dalits should become a strong and positive force for change in Bangladesh in the coming decades.

Gaining Political Position

Political power was rightly seen as the key to all the problems. The Dalit movement linked the concept of State power with its claim of equality. The gamut of reservations basically sprang from this. There is no denying the fact that following the strategy of sharing State power in the prevailing circumstances certainly brought significant gains to Dalits. Through the mechanism of reservations in education, employment and politics, many Dalits are catapulted to positions which otherwise would have been unthinkable to them (Hans, 2016). However, nowadays, like in India or in other countries, Dalits in Bangladesh have begun participating in public debates on social issues and politics. According to the study informants, Dalits have heightened social and political consciousness, which has given them courage not to be submissive to the high caste. In this study, researcher finds that two types of views are observed on political participation of Dalit community. The first view characterizes Dalits as politically apathetic. They are believed to have little interest in politics, have little awareness of political events, and lack internal political organization. Such apathy or non-participation is so deeply entrenched that they alienate themselves from the social, cultural, economic and political life of the country. However, it could be noted that the second view does not consider community dwellers as politically apathetic. They believe that they should have active role in politics as the citizens of the country. In fact, they want to be integrated within the mainstream world through politics. One of the respondents said:

"In the past, our community members were not conscious about

their social and political rights, but now they have created a small space in politics. In the past elections, Dalits were only used as vote banks for many politicians or political parties through bribing leaders of the Dalit communities; since we were illiterate and unaware about the dynamics of politics. Then, we have paid attention to the voices of our 'sardars' (leaders). Mainstream society also thinks that Dalits have no right to participate in politics and decision making structures in Bangladesh."

Dalits have become more conscious about their social rights and self-esteem. This view of the respondent suggests that Dalits feel empowered through involvement in political activities against the caste-based inequality. In this connection, it can be noted that Dalit struggle and the impact of modernisation has brought significant changes in terms of social, political and legal representation that can assist in bringing about social justice in Bangladesh.

Changing Traditional Profession

Occupation is a very complex variable having several sociological elements such as, culture, structure, career, mobility, education, recruitment, remuneration, status, prestige and control including others (Taylor, 1968). Recently, many Dalit peoples are changing their traditional occupations for different causes. In a study it is said that for different reasons, such as, higher income, higher status, hardship of the jobs, death of father, and psychological dissatisfaction, people change their occupations (Ali, 1992). In some cases, there are changes in occupations where people partly or sometimes as a whole change their traditional occupations. On the other hand, in a study it is found that globalisation process has directly hit the traditional occupations of Dalits (Sunar, 2012). It is a well-known fact that the Dalits have historically specialised in the production of all kinds of artistic tools and equipment for household and agricultural production. But globalisation is adversely impacting their traditional occupations now. Their livelihood and specialized

occupation is now being replaced by global capitalistic productions. Easy availability of mass production goods from latest technology based industries at cheap prices has proved to be a big challenge for their traditional occupation.

In this present study, one *Jaat* Sweeper narrates his hope about his child

"My dream is quite small and simple that my child will grow up independent. I also hope that one day they will be able to break free of the cycle of discrimination and poverty that for so long have trapped the people of my community."

In this connection Dalit respondent said:

"The trend of changing traditional occupations has been rapidly occurred in our community. My father was a sweeper, but my father did not want his sons to continue the same occupation as he or his forefathers did. He admitted me to a community school. Now I am a teacher in a non-Dalit pre-school. Here, I somehow feel free from caste-based discrimination and do my job independently."

Finally, due to lack of adequate education and employment the livelihood of the majority of Dalits is dependent on their traditional occupation. Under the changing situation, the government needs to urgently take adequate steps to promote and preserve the unique role of these artisans and for realising their full potential.

Internal and External Migration

People choose migration to find better jobs and other life opportunities. For globalisation and modernisation, a large number of Dalit population has migrated internally and externally in Bangladesh. The reason for this migration is to take hold of the better opportunities in their life. One of my informants said,

"I was a good student from the beginning. I got talent pool stipend from my village school. I did hard labour, but I got less payment which could not fulfil my daily needs and educational

expenditure. In many cases, I faced many obstacles in my study period, but I continued my study. Now I am a student of a public university in the capital city and part-time data operator in an organization. I maintain my study and family expenditure through my income. I feel that in a city, the effect of caste-based discrimination is comparatively lower."

This means that migration empowers the Dalit youths socially and financially. The Dalit youth want to empower their community to "exert and improve competence, as well as develop critical awareness to collaborate for the betterment of organisations and communities" (Ledford *et. al*, 2013). It shows that the level of education also affected the migration issue. When Dalit people become educated, they begin to search better opportunities through migration. In this regard, another respondent also said:

"When I completed my higher education from a public university in Bangladesh, I joined in a multinational company and served there three years. After that, I managed a scholarship for my higher education. During my studies, I faced many inequalities and challenges, but I endured them to empower myself for the dignity of life. Still today I am struggling against the caste-based discrimination and trying to improve conditions in my community."

Cultural Changes

Modernisation, globalisation and urbanisation are major agents of socio-cultural changes (Gurung, 2008). Due to the effect of modernisation and globalisation, Bangladeshi society has been more open in comparison to the past. Development programmes such as improved transportation, communication and modern technology have led to socio-cultural changes. These modern facilities have changed the traditional mind-set of the people, including in untouchable communities. According to a respondent:

"Globalisation and revelation of information technology have

made our life easier to get any news which has made our awareness. Now, we get news easily about social, political and economic matters including Dalit issues. Sometimes, we hear that still now Dalits are not given equal access in public places; even they cannot enjoy constitutional rights like non-Dalits. However, in comparison to the past, we have got more space in urban areas due to our continuous struggle against the caste discrimination."

In the past, restrictions were imposed on the mode of construction of their houses, types of dresses and patterns of their ornaments. Dalit women have a traditional style of wearing their saris and different ornaments, which are different from other women in Bangladesh and this distinction immediately identifies them as Dalit and means they are often treated with contempt. Present day Dalit women feel that they might need to change their style in an effort to escape their identity. A Jaat Sweeper woman gave her account:

"From the ancient time these rules are applicable for the lower caste people that we will follow the traditional style of wearing a sari and ornaments. Our ornaments will make different design with silver, which are totally different from mainstream society so that anyone can easily identify us as a Dalit. We were not allowed to carry umbrellas, to wear shoes or golden ornaments, and to drink cow's milk. In many areas, our males are also prohibited from covering the upper part of their body. Now we realize that it is not right rules for us and these traditional systems should be changed for our next generation."

Relatively older Dalits want to preserve their own traditions such as language, jobs, marriage and kinship systems. For them all they need is to have a guarantee of their jobs and a salary they can make a living with. Younger generation expects a change, and they want that change to happen fast. They want work, education and health care. If they can get work or training in different sectors, they can work and can change their lives by their own (Rahman, 2016). The young generation of mainstream society is also against caste-based system.

One respondent put these changes in the following terms:

"Our younger generation is familiar with the internet technology through mobile phones, they watch television at home, listen to music, and many of them also have friends in mainstream society. Though some upper caste people are still biased against Dalits, but the younger generations are not so much concerned about untouchability. They also share food in hotels and restaurants, but not in their private homes because the parents of youngsters do not allow us to enter into their houses."

This narrative shows that the socio-cultural behaviour towards Dalits has been changing with a new consciousness of young generations. A sixty-five year old Jaat Sweeper said:

"Before 1971, the outsider has generally known what kinds of people live in these quarters and they often try to avoid these places for obvious reasons. That time no outsider would even dare to enter such ghetto due to obnoxious smells of human excreta stemming from the working tools such as big buckets, oxcarts etc. though the introduction of tractors has replaced some of those traditional tools or devices. This time every family has pigs. They and their pigs were living together in this congested area. However, some years ago, mainly the younger generation has taken a difficult task in hand. This task was an attempt to make our community pig free. They have realized the unclean pig is one of the causes of many diseases. Some of the traditional pig owners' point of view, it was an evil work. However, the young generation does it properly."

Changing Women Status

Dalit women are the most marginalized social groups among the marginalized. They face triple marginality first being a Dalit second being economically less fortunate and third as women. High rates of illiteracy, child marriages and early motherhood characterise today's Dalit women. Families are run by strong patriarchal values that often

limit the freedom of choices and expressions of Dalit women in household decision-making (Rahman, 2016). It is notable that in the last three decades, various Dalit organisations, along with Dalit women activists are working for the Dalit employment. The most significant change so far seen is in the field of awareness raising.

As a Dalit leader, Moni Rani Das reflects:

"We are excluded and discriminated through generation to generation. Lack of female education, rigid caste system, attitudes toward women, the rights of the woman are the main reasons for not attending politics. Now we have to realise that change will happen if we get involved in politics. If we ensure a significant level of participation in politics, then we can be quite capable of demanding and protecting our rights and obligation. The empowerment of Dalit women is the only way out of their poverty and oppression."

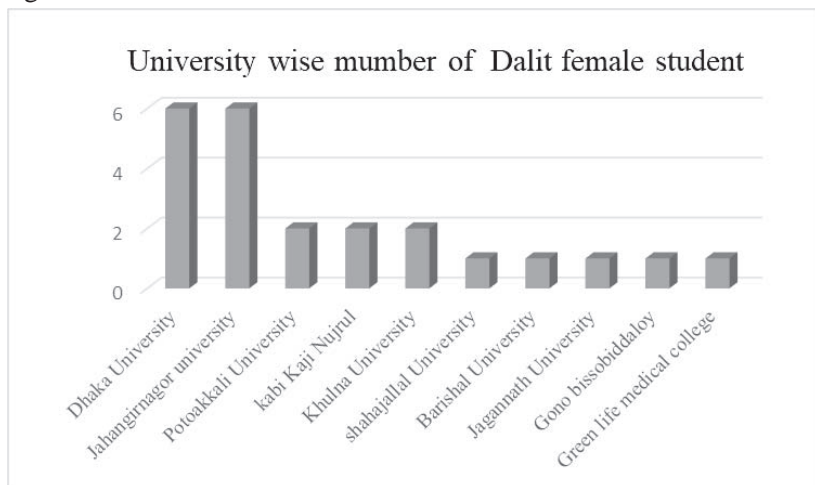
A sharp difference in opinion was found in young and older Dalit members, while exploring the issues of their social change. Young Dalits seem to challenge the gender norms for men and women's household and livelihood roles. Many young male and female Dalits mentioned that Dalit women can or should work outside their homes to bring additional incomes to the family. However, some girls also mentioned that they want to do both (Rhaman, 2016).

One-woman respondent said about this matter:

"I think it cannot be possible to change status of women within the family or community without economic solvency. So most of our young women want to work for extra income for their family. They also think that children rearing and taking care of the family is also very important for them. However, they want to balance out both work and family."

The Dalit women hardly get the opportunity to enjoy freedom of expression. Different schemes and quota systems for Dalits have

been recently introduced in Bangladesh. These measures brought some positive changes for wider Dalit community keeping Dalit women aside. Furthermore, there is no mention of special provision for Dalit women in the policies adopted by Bangladesh government (Nagorik Uddyog, 2017). Within this four years, total 22 female students have got admission in different public universities. This figure is shown below:



Source: Nagorik Uddyog, 2017

Figure1: University Wise Number of Dalit Female Student

Bangladesh government has provision for different skills development trainings for marginalised, disadvantaged and Dalit community under the department of social services and department of women affairs. But very few Dalit women in the rural areas have this information. (Nagorik Uddyog, 2017). Moreover, those who know about these training don't get much scope to attend due to their full-time involvement in the family affairs and restriction by the family members.

Forming National and International Organisations

With the goal of eradicating caste-based discrimination and untouchability, Dalits have formed different organisations in

collaboration with international donor organisations. "The organisations place emphasis on equal rights and living with dignity and freedom" (Kharel, 2007). There are a number of NGOs and Dalit led organisation working towards addressing the issues that Dalit communities face and there have been positive changes as a result of their work. NGOs have identified numerous ways to further address the issues including a change in the constitution to include a reference to untouchability, more awareness raising activities, further research and the inclusion of Dalit communities in the government census (Hussain, 2017). NGOs are doing a noble work, as they feel excluded and neglected by powerful authorities from the state and its institutions. They cannot articulate how they can organise themselves to take active role in the society and be included as citizens of Bangladesh. But they believe that NGO initiatives can make a positive impact on their lives and livelihood. (Rhaman, 2016). The major efforts of these organizations remain at integrating development agendas along with their objective of establishing an equitable society. According to my respondents,

"By and large, NGO initiatives have been very positive to help organize and aware Dalits of their rights and entitlements. These initiatives are a good way to help us organise ourselves to uphold our constitutional rights. These organisations try to empower us through Radio, TV, Telefilm, Street drama, training, seminar, interaction, discussion and co-picnics, cultural programs, legal literacy networking, and mobilization. Nowadays, Dalits, specifically the urban Dalits, are more aware of their rights compared to their previous generations."

Government initiatives for the betterment of urban Dalits are near zero. In recent years, to respond to the pressure from various national and international organisations, associations, networks, and civil society activism, the government has allocated an increased budget for the betterment of Dalit lives and livelihood (Rahman, 2016). For providing employable skills for livelihood for Dalits, Department of Social Welfare is covering 25 districts in 2016-17 (under the social

safety net program). The provision of skills training for Dalit, Bedey and Horijon community started in 2012-13. Total 5300 people from these communities so far received skills training. But there is no mention of how many Dalit so far received skills training, let alone mentioning the number of Dalit women (Nagorik Uddyog, 2017).



Source: Nagorik Uddyog, 2017

Figure 2: Number of People who Receive Skills Training from Government Institution Under Dalit, Bedey and Horijon life Standard Development Programme.

So, nowadays, Dalits have been more conscious regarding their socio-cultural rights, education, property rights and constitutional rights that have reduced the level of caste discrimination vis-à-vis past. Similarly, the development activities and motivational campaigning with them through awareness programs are playing a vital role to change their attitudes and concepts, which have gradually increased their social status.

Conclusion

Social change through the empowerment of marginalised groups is a complex process. Education should provide not only the tools for employment for marginalised groups but also opportunities to raise

their critical awareness of social hierarchies (Freire, 1970). They should be able to resist and contest essentialised representations of social differences (Freire, 1970 and Fuss, 1989). Similarly, the dominant group members need to develop a critical consciousness to understand the historical exigencies in creating, perpetuating, and sustaining various essentialised representations of social groups, such as caste, class, and gender (Fuss, 1988 and Grosz, 1994). Dalit movement in Bangladesh basically started at the beginning of the 21st century, which, though helped bring positive changes in the lives of Dalits. Dalit struggle refers to a socio-political movement of Dalit people to demolish caste-based discrimination in Bangladesh. Dalits are still facing social problems owing to the stigma of untouchability, low caste, despite the empowerment attempts through constitutional provisions. It is also a struggle for equality, freedom and social justice in human society. Recently Bangladesh had brought some improvements in the lives of Dalits, making these special provisions to provide them education, employment, access to land, health, housing and other resources. They have been much overlooked in the development and rights discourse and have only recently been able to raise their voices. Having started to engage with government and international donors, they have now managed to place the issue of caste discrimination on the agenda. However, in a study Hans, (2008) suggested that the modern and growing society recognises that social justice cannot be delivered only through reservations, subsidies and grants. This realisation takes countries away from utopian ideologies to innovation, employment creation, innovation and inclusion. There is now a clear vision for how countries can tackle social exclusion, a scope for synthesising growth and change through equity. In another study, he also suggested that the vision will get sharper with a critique of globalisation, with all its crises of identity and assimilation of stakeholders. Social capital formation necessitates social integration, not exclusion. The real test of our ability to address effectively the manifold challenges to social integration and harmony will be seen in our struggle/journey to uphold peace, justice and equality in the arena of balanced and sustainable economic development and there is no alternative (Hans, 2007).

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