

FINAL REPORT

An Ethnographic Journey Through the Lives of Urban Dalits in Bangladesh

Funded By HEKS/EPER

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By

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ACRONYM LIST

| | |
|-------|--|
| ARCO | Association for Rural Cooperation |
| BDT | Bangladesh Taka (Bangladesh Currency) |
| BDEWF | Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Women Federation |
| BDERM | Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Right Movement |
| CSO | Civil Society organization |
| ESDO | Eco Social Development Organization |
| EU | European Union |
| FGD | Focus Group Discussion |
| GoB | Government of Bangladesh |
| GBK | Gram Bikas Kendra |
| HSC | Higher Secondary Certificate |
| IDSN | International Dalit Solidarity Network |
| IDI | In-depth Interview |
| IMDA | Inclusive Market Development Approach |
| IVCA | Integrated Value Chain Approach |
| IGA | Income Generating Activities |
| KII | Key Informant Interview |
| MP | Member of Parliament |
| NGO | Non-Government Organization |
| NFPE | Non-Formal Primary Education |
| RBA | Right Based Approach |
| SERP | Service Emergency for Rural People |
| SSC | Secondary School Certificate |
| TOR | Terms of Reference |
| UN | United Nations |

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This is an anthropological research on urban Dalits in selected northern districts of Bangladesh that is commissioned by HEKS/EPER. The study aims at providing some analysis on dynamics of Dalit communities that in turn helps in future program interventions for the betterment of Dalit's lives and livelihood. This study is qualitative in nature. Some qualitative research techniques were adopted to collect information from the field. The study was conducted over a period of two months. Primarily, data were collected from urban Dalits. In addition, data from various other internal and external stakeholders were collected as well.

Urban Dalits in selected northern districts under this study have been living in dire socio economic conditions. Government being the basic service provider does not provide regular and adequate utility services to urban Dalit communities. Scarcity of safe water, inadequate sanitation & drainage system, lack of hygiene, lack of knowledge of proper menstrual hygiene management, lack of solid waste disposal management system, congested & unhygienic living space are the severe problem & health hazards for the urban Dalits under this study. The rate of illiteracy is very high. Due to their 'untouchables' social stigma, children experience discriminations in enrollments in schools. Only recently, initiatives by NGOs through lobbying and advocacy with government officials, PPS and NFPE School activities by GBK, School Management Committees (SMCs), and other powerful stakeholders, Dalit children's acceptance in schools gradually improve. Along with social exclusion, poverty remains a crucial reason for school drop-outs.

Livelihood options for urban Dalits are very limited. The major sources of livelihood for urban Dalits are Traditional cleaning/Sweeping jobs in government railways, hospitals and municipalities, rearing of pigs, money lending and illegal alcohol business. Urban Dalits do not have diverse sources of income. On average, a part-time government cleaning/sweeping job pays BDT 1200 per month for two-three hours per day in six days a week. The income from their jobs is so inadequate to meet their basic daily needs, they are forced to find an additional income through manual scavenging for their survival. Except a few, most Dalits have no way to save money. Kinship ties play a significant role in the lives and livelihoods of urban Dalits. Two forms of kinships are dominant among urban Dalits- kinship through marriage and kinship through blood. The practice of dowry is widespread. They have no representation in local power structure. For dispute resolution they seek justice from their own political organization named *Mondol*. However, in recent times, the increasing trends of intra community tensions and disputes make the *Mondol* as an organization less effective.

The processes of Dalit marginalization are multi-dimensional and complex. Dalit marginalization is manifested in their access to land, jobs, economic resources, public space, and other basic services. Among Dalits, women are most marginalized. Women face Triple marginality as Dalit, as economically less fortunate, as being a woman and as being a Dalit.

Although urban Dalits encounter similar injustice, discriminations and sufferings across Bangladesh, they are not homogenous. They are divided in line with age,

gender, caste, religions and 'economic class'. Thus, the heterogeneity in the community leaves many individuals with varied degree of power and agency. A sharp difference in opinion was found in young and older Dalit members, while explored the issues of their social change. Some Dalit members adopt different strategies to negotiate and navigate to interact with the dominant Mainstream society. The two most popular strategies Dalit practice to avoid social exclusion is migration and hiding of their identity.

Seeking alternative economic opportunities for Dalit is a tricky exercise. Social stigma, lack of Dalit motivations and lack of alternative job opportunities restricts scope and potential of alternative livelihood for urban Dalits in Bangladesh. However, Inclusive Market development Approach adopted by HEKS/EPER seems to have lot of potential in the future. The focus for development of urban Dalits should be on the future generations and youths. Thus, concerted efforts from the GO and NGOs can be an answer to their problem of economic survival.

Chapter 1

Introduction, Objectives and Methodology

1.1 Prologue¹

Dalit is the self-chosen political name of the castes in South Asia region who were formerly considered 'untouchable' according to the Hindu Varna system. Currently, Dalits perform as occupational groups in Bangladesh. An estimated 5.5 million people belong to *Dalits* in Bangladesh (IDSN, 2006). Different research shows that 94 categories of *Dalits* live in Bangladesh. Among them the major communities are *Bnashfore, Hela, Lalbegi, Domar, Hari, Balmeki, Telegu, Jele, Behara, Dai, Nikari, Teli* etc. Although the Constitution of the People's Republic of Bangladesh promises to ensure equal rights and dignity for all citizens, unfortunately, due to various factors including the knowledge and behavior of the society, *Dalits* remain oppressed in all aspects. It can be said that among the marginalized population, *Dalits* especially the urban Dalits are considered as extremely vulnerable due to their limited economic opportunities and other constraints to engage in economic activities. This study aims at urban Dalits mostly the *Harijans* living in selected northern districts of Bangladesh.

1.2 Rationale of the Project¹

HEKS/EPER works among 1950 Dalit Households (HHs) up to 2016 living in railway and municipal colonies in five districts such as *Bogra, Dinajpur, Joypurhat, Naogaon Nilphamary, Rangpur and Thakurgaon* in Bangladesh. The aim of HEKS/EPER initiative is to ensure social inclusion of *Dalits* in mainstream population and institutions. To ensure Dalit's social inclusion, HEKS/EPER applies two program approaches 1) Human Rights Based Approach (HRBA) and 2) Inclusive Market Development Approach (IMDA).

Despite these efforts, it has been observed that social inclusion in Dalit communities is still a far cry. A deep sense of insecurity and feeling of mistrust among the *Dalits* hinder the possibility of any positive changes and inclusion them into the mainstream society and institutions. Therefore, an in depth understanding of their cultural relativism, intra and inter community dispute, intolerance and conflict among them deemed to be necessary for future interventions by HEKS/EPER.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The overall objective of this study is to provide anthropological insights in understanding urban Dalits and their lives in selected areas.

1.4 Specific Objectives

The specific research objectives are:

- a. To understand the perception of social inclusion by *Dalits* themselves.
- b. To explore the challenges and opportunities of the existing initiatives towards the betterment of Dalit people.

¹ These two sections are taken directly from the Term of Reference (ToR)

- c. To identify the needs of the urban *Dalit* communities and how to address those.
- d. To provide practical recommendation for HEKS/EPER to enhance social inclusion of *Dalits* into the mainstream society.

1.5 Why an Anthropological Research?

Organizations working on Dalit lives and livelihoods focus more from the perspectives of human rights concern. Thus, a good number of literatures inform us about the violation of human rights of Dalits by the state and the mainstream society. But less attention is paid on systemic understanding of Dalit lives and livelihoods, social determinants and the growing sense of insecurity among them. The main focuses of this research were to understand the complex dynamics of the urban Dalits communities, their socio-economic conditions and livelihood pattern, and challenges and opportunities of future social inclusion from an anthropological perspective.

1.6 Major Anthropological Queries:

- In what ways Dalit feels excluded from the mainstream societies? What Dalit communities mean by social inclusion?
- What is the inner dynamics of Dalit sub-culture? How does change happen amongst Dalit?
- How Dalit sub-culture (kinship, customs, rituals, symbols and other aspects) in urban areas co-exist, interact and negotiate with the so-called dominant culture?
- To what extent modes of behaviour of Dalits reinforce the social exclusion and conflicts with mainstream society?
- What are the challenges of GO/NGO initiatives so far for the betterment of Dalit community?
- What are the policy instruments and institutional mechanisms they could explore as citizen as well as a distinct group?
- What characteristics should an economic activity own in order to reduce discrimination from the dominant culture and foster social inclusion of the urban Dalit? What economic activity could this be (list and explain ideas)?
- What do they think is necessary to change their lives?
- How they perceive development interventions initiated by external actors?

This anthropological study was conducted taking the above objectives into consideration. Indeed, these objectives provided the research team the ability to organize and conduct the study in a well-planned manner.

1.7 Major Themes

Four major themes have been identified from the above objectives, which are as follows:

1. **Socio economic conditions and Cultural Dynamism**: Under this theme, problems in the community, the level and challenges of education, livelihood options, income and expenditure, savings, and kinship and marriage system are highlighted.

2. **Process of Social Exclusion:** This theme focuses on the nature of social exclusion in areas such as access to lands, traditional jobs, and basic services, public spaces were discussed with a focus on women.

3. **Crisis of Identity** Issues of identity, hopelessness and their strategies to negotiate and interact with the broader political, economic and ideological forces have been discussed.

4. **Perception on Development Interventions:** Dalit's perception of development interventions also highlighted.

1.8 Significance of the Study

The available information on Dalits in Bangladesh is mostly on their social and historical trajectories, lack of their access to basic services and the nature of their marginalization and its processes. However, research on Dalits especially the urban Dalits in relation to a broader social and cultural process is rare. No attempt has been made to understand the inner dynamics of Dalit community that is important for any future program intervention.

The present study provides systematic qualitative information about the urban Dalits residing in railway colonies and hospital compounds in selected districts such as Rangpur, Dinajpur and Nilphamary. This study has been designed to provide qualitative as well as analytical information for understanding the complex and dynamic relationship of urban Dalits networks within and beyond. It is expected that findings of this study will provide input to undertake an appropriate program for urban Dalits in the future.

1.9 Methodologies

The study employed two types of methodologies for information collection - secondary data analysis and primary data from the participants through fieldwork from three northwest districts in Bangladesh.

1.9.1 Secondary Data Analysis

The secondary data analysis constituted analysis of accumulated information available in the literature. Secondary data collection was completed prior to the primary information from the target community. The process helped the researcher to get idea on the future strategic priority for HEKS/EPER, strengthen items of enquiry and design appropriate instruments for fieldwork. The secondary information was collected from the following sources:

- Formally published books, book chapters and published articles focusing on challenges and opportunities of Dalit communities in Bangladesh.
- Unpublished papers, research reports, newsletter, paper clippings on education.
- HEKS/EPER project reports, case studies, media reports and evaluation reports, if any.
- Review of other HEKS/EPER studies, IDSN publications and studies conducted by different researchers and organizations as well as various reports produced by UN functions and respective counter parts (i.e. the government and CSOs) at national level.

1.9.2 Primary Data Collection

Primary data were collected through a participatory approach with all relevant stakeholders. The key respondents for this study were the members of Dalit community in target areas. Along with them, the researcher also collected information from other important stakeholders such as providers of government basic services, non-profit organizations working on Dalits. Different qualitative techniques were used such as direct observation, In-depth Interview (IDI), Key Informant Interview (KII) focus group discussion (FGD), and case studies. In order to collect accurate and valid data, IDIs, FGDs & KIIs were conducted through checklists with a combination of closed and open-ended questions as needed. Draft checklists for each tool were shared and finalized by the HEKS/EPER Team.

This is a qualitative study. The qualitative data were gathered through different participatory methods and tools. The selection of FGD, IDI and KII participants were done in close consultation with HEKS/EPER team and the partner organizations. Attempts were made to capture the voices and narratives of different sections, ages, professional categories of Dalit community. Thus, a representative sample population for each data collection method was selected. An additional emphasis was given on data collection from female members of Dalit community in the target areas. The information collected by using several tools complemented and helped the researcher to crosscheck information that enhanced the analytical rigor of the study. The questionnaire and checklists were prepared in such a way so that the research objectives and the expected output spelled out in the TOR are achieved. A brief description of major qualitative methods used in the study is given below:

1.9.2.1 Observation

In recent years observation in an informal setting has become an important way to get valid and accurate information on the life of the people. In this study observation constituted an important means to collect qualitative information in a natural setting. The researcher and his team undertook visit with HEKS/EPER officials in study areas. Observation focused on Dalit life, their encounters with mainstream societies, household dynamics, male and female interactions, and children out doors.

1.9.2.2 In-depth Interviews

Twenty Nine (29) in-depth interviews with a combination of open and structured questions were conducted. These include different members of Dalit community in target areas, such as moneylenders, Dalits with government jobs, unemployed Dalits, Leaders of Dalit Community, youth males and females executive directors of partner NGOs, government basic service providers and other stakeholders. The information collected through interviews was useful to double check with the information collected from other techniques. Keeping the objectives of the research, a random sampling from various categories of dalits was selected for the in-depth interview.

1.9.2.3 Focus Group Discussion (FGD)

Sixteen (16) FGDs were conducted for primary data collection with male members, female members, young boys and girls, members who receive NGO supports, members without NGO services. Each FGD consisted of 8 to 10 respondents. The topics of discussion were in line with the objective of the study. Attempts were made to avoid any dominant respondent during FGD. Furthermore, the researchers avoided sensitive, judgmental and leading questions.

1.9.2.4 Key Informant Interview (KII)

Eleven (11) KIIs were conducted with target stakeholders. The key informants were the females and male members of Dalit community, Government basic service providers in railway and hospitals, potential employers in public and private sectors, moneylenders, senior Dalit members, respected community leaders, local government officials and other important stakeholders. Those Key Informants were randomly selected.

1.9.2.5 Case Studies

Seven (07) case studies were conducted in an aim to describe the situation of Dalit community in great details. This case study showcased the problems and challenges of inclusion in mainstream society. The case studies also provided the rich everyday lived experience of Dalit members and their future aspirations. The cases were selected on the basis of events in individual life that closely corresponded with the major themes of this study such as process of marginalization and issues of identity among the Dalits.

The required information for this study was collected through application of participatory methods where every participant was able to take part in open information sharing process. The qualitative methods adopted in this study were shown in the table below.

| Methods | Target Areas | | | | | | | Total |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|---------------------------|----------------|----------------------|----------------------|-------|
| | Central Hospital, Rangpur | Rishipara, Rangpur | Railway Coloni, Parbatipur | Jahangirnagar, Parbatipur | GBK Parbatipur | Munshipara, Sayedpur | Powerhouse, Sayedpur | |
| Field Observation | | | | | | | | All |
| FGD | 3 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 2 | 2 | 16 |
| IDI | 5 | 4 | 4 | 3 | 5 | 4 | 4 | 29 |
| Key Informants Interview (KII) | 2 | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 1 | 2 | 11 |
| Case Studies | 2 | 1 | 1 | | 2 | | 1 | 07 |

1.9.2.6 Tentative Matrix and the Approaches

| Objectives | Data Sources | Methods |
|---|--|--|
| Objective1: To explore the challenges and barriers of urban Dalits' social inclusion. | Secondary: All available and accessible scholarly publications, media reports, HEKS/EPER project documents, relevant policy documents of GoB and Donors. Primary: Target groups, HEKS/EPER project Management Team, partner Staff, government service providers and relevant stakeholders | Desk Review of Secondary Literature, Field Observation, Survey, IDs, KII, FGDs |
| Objective2: To understand the value of integration with mainstream population allowing them to continue to live as one of the subculture of urban economic system. | Secondary: Relevant articles and books. Primary: Members of Dalit Community, officials of partner organization of HEKS /EPER | Field Observation, Survey, IDs, KIIs, FGDs |
| Objective 3: To identify the needs of the urban Dalit communities and how to address those. | Secondary: Relevant secondary literature Primary: Target groups, NGO officials, Municipals officials, Government basic service providers and other stakeholders, | Desk Review of Secondary Literature, Survey, Field Observation, IDs, KII, FGDs, case studies |
| Objective 4: To explore the means of social inclusion with mainstream communities. | Secondary: Relevant secondary literature. Primary: Target groups, NGO officials, Municipals officials, Government basic service providers, and other stakeholders | Desk Review of Secondary Literature, Survey, Field Observation, IDs, KII, FGDs, case studies |

1.9.2.7 Quality Control& Data Management: Qualitative and Quantitative Data

Qualitative data were collected by following a check list. Several FGDs, KIIs, IDIs, and case studies were conducted by the consultant.

For qualitative data, the researchers followed a flexible approach in adopting qualitative methods. The follow up questions were formulated during the interviews instantly keeping the overall objectives in mind. The researchers took extensive notes during each of the interviews, discussions, observation and

conversation. These field notes were expanded in order to find out how the respondents described their situations including problems and the solution/s they suggest. The qualitative information provided the basis for the in-depth understanding of the issues raised in the objectives of the study.

All the data/information were checked or discussed with the implementation staff of HEKS/EPER and partners in case of any clarification. Attempts were made to make the report analytical.

1.9.2.8 Framework for Data Analysis

Considering the objectives of the study and human nature of the HEKS/EPER program, attempts were made to capture the *emic* (insider's) perspective of the respondents. The emphasis of the presentation of the report is not on what? Rather how? And why? Therefore, the processes of marginalization, the problems they face to eke out livelihood strategies, health, education and solutions they suggested from their perspectives that were highlighted in the report.

1.10 Limitations of the Study

Due to the time and resource constraints it was not possible to do a classical long-term ethnographic study. Despite efforts and the sincere endeavor of the HEKS/EPER officials, the study team could not interview some of drug/alcohol dealers privately. This is due to their refusal. As a result some of the issues of the interviews had to be dropped. The study team found that the respondents became impatient and inattentive after some time of the discussion.

The team conducted the Key Informant Interview (KII) and FGDs smoothly. However, difficulty was faced in gathering the Dalit members at particular times of day. Therefore, the team had to wait for long periods prior to the interviews. To get the actual information needed, we required a high level of trust and confidence. This research team was lucky to be introduced by the trusted project personnel to the respondents, which made it possible to collect rich data within a relatively short period of time. However, introduction by the project personnel, created some problems in getting the data from the respondents too as some information provided by the respondents seemed biased due to the role of the project personnel as donor.

1.11 Structure of the Report

The study report has five chapters. Chapter 1 contains objectives, methodologies, significance and limitations of the study. Chapter 2 contains review of literature on Social exclusion/inclusion of Dalits. Chapter 3 describes the socio economic conditions and their cultural dynamics. Chapter 4 explains the processes of social exclusion. Finally, Chapter 5 describes the Dalit's dilemma in the shattered world.

Chapter 2

Review of Literature

2.1 Literature Review

In India and Nepal, there has been a significant amount of information on castes, untouchables and Dalits. The scholarship focuses more on historical and sociological trajectories of caste systems in Indian sub-continent. Anthropological studies on social inequality and social and economic justice is not new. Anthropologists devoted their time and energy in understanding the production and reproduction of inequality in different society across time and space. Dalit community as a dynamic social site can unpack many issues of the theoretical concerns that exist in poverty, social justice, resistance studies and studies on power and agency etc.

In Bangladesh, in recent years, a good amount of research reports on Dalits have begun to emerge. These are mostly done by various national and international NGOs, UN agencies and other donor agencies. The focus of these studies is mainly the understanding the situation and problems of Dalits such as their process of marginalization and issues of their human rights. Lately, Government has begun to include the issues of Dalits marginality in their policy discourse. However, it is limited to maintain the quota systems for Dalits employments. Serious theoretical and academic literature on urban Dalits has begun to emerge. Studies by Uddin (2015) can be mentioned here. Uddin (2015) attempted to shed lights on the vulnerability of Dalits from a theoretical lens proposed by Nancy Fraser (2007). Uddin argued that unless and until Bangladesh nation-state and dominant mainstream society recognize the identity and cultural diversity of Dalits, all initiatives mostly by international donors to reduce the sufferings of Dalits would not be successful. Ainoon and Hasan (2015) provides a detail account of socio-economic life of urban Dalits in Bangladesh. Their study focuses on the process of marginalization of Dalits by the wider society. The study also provided important insights in understanding the complex dynamics of urban Dalits society in contemporary Bangladesh.

2.2 A Theoretical Framework

In case of Dalits, Deliege (1992) argued that they are excluded based on geographical separation and social distance and their marginal social position is owed to their relationship to impurities associated with death and organic pollution. Dalits are denied the control of the means of production. This results in forms of deprivation and poverty that enforce dependence, deference, and ultimately acceptance. Fredericks (2010) suggested that belongingness as experienced in everyday relations constructs the kinds of sentiments on which societies of exclusion (and inclusion) are based. Fredericks makes the case for the importance of the everydayness of belonging and attachment, and the memory and tradition it reinforces as means of appropriation and territorialization. Urban Dalit's exclusion by ascription has an economic dimension also through the way in which untouchables are "denied control of the means of production" (Deliege, 1992). This results in forms of deprivation and poverty that enforce dependence, deference, and ultimately acceptance. Leach (1960) also suggested that caste

classifications facilitate divisions of labor free of the competition and expectations of mobility inherent in other systems.

Cohen (2016) argued that the dominant understanding of social inclusion and social exclusion needs to go beyond the dyadic mode of reasoning in contemporary globalized societies. With special reference to migration and citizenships, he adopted nine perspectives at three different levels to understand social inclusion and social exclusion in contemporary global world. These are individual (micro), societal (meso) and structural (macro) levels.

Dillard and Dujon et. al. (2013) argued that the meaning and application of social inclusion as a multi-level approach to the social aspects of the sustainability. By citing case studies from developed and developing countries, they explored inclusion in economic sector, community health and wellbeing and in community resources and resilience

Burden and Hamm (2004) examine the exclusion of groups and policy response of New Labour. They argued, in some context, characterization of work, as an important form of social participation through which citizenship status and social inclusion can be achieved is itself potentially exclusionary. They argue that viewing work, as a moral obligation and a necessary part of self-esteem can be problematic where opportunities are low in some occupations and geographical locations.

Rimmerman (2013) explored national and international perspectives on social inclusion of people with disabilities. He looked at biblical, theological and historical aspects on current views of inclusion. In addition, he explored effective strategies for promoting social inclusion and advocate for both human rights and social protection strategy by national and international bodies. He also emphasized declarative and abstract rights to be translated into domestic laws. At the end, he touched upon the role of media in both stereotyping disabilities and can potentially be a tool through media campaign to enhance social inclusion of people with disabilities.

Silver (1995) mentioned that France first adopts the term social inclusion in 1970s. Disabled and various destitute groups were referred through the lenses of social inclusion and exclusion. And contemporary meanings of social inclusion and exclusion are rooted in France.

The concept of social exclusion gradually evolved to refer to process that prevent individual or groups from full or partial meaningful participation in social, economic, political, cultural activities and life. (Duffy, 1995, 2001; Horsell, 2006, referenced in, Allman 2012)

In the light of emphasis on Inclusion in Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), Silver (2015) argued that social inclusion and exclusion are context-dependent concepts. Nation-states and localities have their own mechanisms by which influence the process of economic, social and political exclusion. She reminds that while social exclusion is condemned as unjust, at the same time social inclusion

or openness has its own problems too. Social inclusion means acculturation that can lead to the decline of group ways of life, identity, language, solidarity, and group practices as well. She argues that while social inclusion is a good objective, it all depends on the context.

There is a need to theorize Dalit's social inclusion/exclusion. The concept of social exclusion/inclusion was prominent in the policy discourse in France in the mid-1970s. Then, the concept was later adopted by the European Union in the late 1980s as a key concept in social policy and in many instances replaced the concept of poverty (Navin, 2008). If I am allowed to do an oversimplification of popular and dominant ideas of social inclusions championed by scholars such as Silver, 1995; Rimmerman, 2013; and Cohen, 2016. By and large, most scholarships on social exclusions view that marginalized people need access to economic resources to become a productive member of the society, their marketable skills and knowledge can be utilized which in turn help them improve their socio-economic conditions. These theories view poor or marginalized people as victim of larger social processes. Lack of state interventions, and dominance of market logics are viewed as two main villains for the domination and subjugation of marginalized people. They see marginalized people as victims of institutionalized domination and subordination without having any agency or power to fight back against it. Thus, they advocate a framework of inclusion through access to education, health and other basic services and the entitlements of them as human beings and citizens.

Popular and dominant arguments of social inclusion championed by scholars such as Silver, 1995; Rimmerman, 2013; and Cohen, 2016 argued for social integration, social cohesion and advocate to remove barriers to social inclusion. The attempts to include Dalits in the mainstream society are driven by many national and international NGOs and donors. Lately, the government of Bangladesh is also taking minimal initiatives in the form of declaration of quota system to secure their jobs. Despite all, it is found that a viable framework of inclusion program is yet to achieve.

In this research, I did not dare to theorize urban Dalits in this short period of time. However, following a Bourdieuan model (1977), in contemporary market-based societies, three forms of capital such as economic, social and cultural are necessary for any individual to make a decent living. Urban Dalits lack all three forms of capital. Urban Dalits are in need of accumulating these capitals. Unfortunately, they have no guarantee to gain these capitals while dwelling in a bounded Dalit community.

Generally, economic capital refers to individual's wealth such as land, money, and assets, ornaments that can be transferred into wealth. Social capital refers to the wide social relationships an individual gain through her/his patrilineal and matrilineal kinships ties, marriage and from other social/cultural institutions. And finally, cultural capital means individual's linguistic and communicative skills and knowledge both formal and informal and tastes of choices. Considering all three capitals, urban Dalits do not have a decent income for expenses to meet their everyday basic needs. They have no access to land, credits and loans from

formal institutions, and cannot access to other economic resources. They have limited social capital through kinship networks within their community. They are not allowed to gain social capitals through other cultural and social institutions such as schools, clubs, associations, alumni, etc. Dalits are eager but feel insecure to gain these three capitals from their family and other social and economic institutions. Lastly, cultural capital in this case refers to skills and knowledge that is marketable to make a living. Most urban Dalits lack those as they don't have enough education to get another job in such a competitive market such as that of Bangladesh. However, most urban Dalits dream of having a decent life one day.

Like other scholars, I see Dalit community as a dynamic and complex social site that is heterogeneous and requires a holistic understanding that can be attentive and informative to the theories of power, agency and resistance. Towards a very first step in that direction, I tried to unpack the complex dynamics in selected urban Dalit community and suggested that Dalit community as a social site deserves a long-term anthropological and sociological research which in turn might provide useful theoretical insights to reassessment of dominant theories of social inclusion/exclusion, market, and issues of power, agency. Therefore, any behavioral changes such as changes in their economic activities which we plan for the urban Dalits requires an understanding of the community as a complex social, economic, political and ideological field where intersections of different fields constantly orient and reorient the norms, beliefs and consciousness of Dalit members in their daily life experiences.

Chapter 3

Socio-Economic Conditions and Cultural dynamism

In this chapter general socioeconomic background of the Dalits such as education and literacy, income, expenditure and savings, problems they faced in their lives especially on their health and hygiene have been discerned. This chapter contains qualitative and quantitative information to provide an understanding about the background of urban Dalit's lives and livelihood.

3.1 Education and Literacy

A survey conducted by Equity Watch in 2014 suggests that among the Dalits surveyed, almost half (44.9%) never attended school, only 36.4% attended primary school, 12.5% attended secondary level and only 4.3% attended higher secondary level. The HEKS/EPER baseline survey in 2013 found a literacy rate among male and female Dalits of 48.3% and 38.7% respectively. The highest rate of illiteracy was also found among the sweepers- *Harijans*. Survey results show that 84.3% of the respondents mentioned poverty as the main reason for not attending schools. Other causes included distance of schools, negligence from the parents and the discrimination in school practices.

Field data shows that except a few, none of the respondents for this study completed SSC (Secondary School Certificate) and HSC (Higher Secondary Certificates). However, an initiative by HEKS/EPER, known as HOME, is very popular among the urban Dalits in project areas. The good educational attainment by those young boys and girls has become a source of inspiration for many in the Dalit community and parents dream to send their sons and daughters to the HOME. However, sustainability, dependency and value for money for an institution like HOME remain a challenge in the on-going debates of strategies of social inclusion of Dalits.

All parents with children we spoke to want to send their children to school. They have expressed their dissatisfaction and frustration how in the past, it had been difficult for them to get admission for their children at near-by mainstream schools, be it private or public. However, they also mentioned that the acceptance of their children in schools is gradually increasing. And their children are going to schools but they are not sure how long they can continue to bear the educational expenses of their children.

3.2 Livelihood Options

Livelihood options for urban Dalits are very limited. This section highlights the major sources of livelihood for urban Dalits in study areas.

3.2.1 Sweeping and cleaning

The major economic activity for urban Dalits in Bangladesh has been the sweeping/cleaning that they have been doing for generations. Only a few hold permanent position as cleaner/sweeper in government sectors such as railways,

municipalities and hospitals. There are different modes of this work. Four major categories of works are evident from the field:

- Permanent employees in the government sectors such as railways, hospitals and municipalities
- Part-time employees in the government mostly on master roll
- Part-time employees in private entities such as clinics, shopping centers, offices, *Hats* (a weekly open market place).
- Independent work known as '*Baltir kaj*' (manual scavenging)

The number of Dalits working as permanent employees in the government such as railways, hospitals and municipalities is very few. Some are also involved in public jobs as part-timer. They are usually on a master roll. They receive a minimum salary with no other additional benefits such as provident funds, gratuity and pensions that come with permanent positions. Most Dalits find their part-time cleaning/sweeping jobs in other private entities such as educational institutions, private offices, and in some other business entities at near-by market place. The independent mode of work locally known as '*baltir Kaj*' (manual scavenging) is very prominent among the Dalits. This mode of work is less formal, 'dirty', uncertain, labor intensive, financially rewarding and allows certain liberty on their part. Dalit can enjoy more negotiating power in deciding on the price of their services. This independent work may be financially rewarding but socially demeaning in comparison to other categories of cleaning jobs.

The office hours for government cleaning jobs usually are in the early morning between 6-8 am. Thus, whoever holds a permanent and part-time government jobs, can finish their job by 10:00 am and are free to do the same cleaning jobs at other private places and raise additional incomes. Interestingly, the person holding the government job can occasionally send a substitution, mostly his/her relatives and friends, to do his job. As the cleaning job requires by employers to be completed before the regular office hours for others at 9:00 am, employers are also bit relaxed in accepting substitution for the job. Although informal, this arrangement has a strong presence in the practice of Dalit daily lives. It is also observed that Dalits holding permanent government jobs are economically better off which in turn allows them to gain more social respect and power within their community. Part time works in both public and private sectors are less valued as it features with less money and more uncertainty.

From the field it is also observed that a lot of the government permanent jobs are being sub-contracted to and by the Dalits. This sub-contracting of government cleaning jobs is evident in railways, municipalities and in government hospitals. The lack of government supervision and high degree of corruption is common in urban Dalits government job recruitments.

3.2.2 Rearing of Pigs

A traditional economic activity for the urban Dalit is rearing the pigs. They have been doing this for generations. Thus, they have a better knowledge and skills of pig rearing that has been transferred from one generation to another. Pigs play an important role in their economic and social life. Selling off pigs is an attractive source of income for Dalits. Pigs are a high status marker and a delicate food items in the Dalit community that are served during festivals like marriage and funerals.

It is also a marker of economic strength of a Dalit household. Study findings suggest that households with many pigs have better chances of getting good marriage proposals for their daughters. Due to various reasons, the living spaces for Dalits are shrinking gradually; hence, rearing of pigs in urban areas has become a challenge for the Dalits.

3.2.3 Illegal Alcohol Business

Some Dalits are legally permitted to consume certain amount of alcohol by the government laws. However, there are evidences of taking advantage of that privilege. Some Dalits are involved in selling off alcohol, mostly the native brands, to outsiders. In some cases, it is a source of disappointments for many Dalits and the local enforcement agencies. Data also shows that in some areas powerful local *Mastans* (hooligans) are involved in this illegal business and are using the alcohol license by force or some mutual contracts. Although, most respondents mentioned that the alcohol trading in recent years has declined drastically but there are some 'pockets' in almost all Dalit colonies where illegal liquor trade occurs.

3.2.4 Money Lending

Taking loans from moneylenders is a common feature in almost all Dalit households. For some Dalit members lending money at high interest rate is a source of making an income. Lending money is very profitable for the moneylenders as the interest rate can be as high as 200%. As Dalits have no access to formal institutions such as banks and other credit groups, moneylenders are their only viable option to take loans at the time of their dire needs. Thus, moneylenders are economically rich and become richer. Dalits take loans on occasions such as marriage, medical treatment and to meet their daily expenses. Sometimes loans being taken to pay a bribe to secure a job, buy jewelry, pay dowry and celebrating some social and family parties.

This economic exploitation by their own community members has become a source of anger for many Dalits. During fieldwork, many Dalits feared to share this information with the study team. This has become their internal source of anger within the community. A lot of community members do feel that they are being exploited by those powerful economic elites within their own community. These moneylenders have good connection with local power structure including the high officials of railways, doctors and nurses at the hospitals and local government representatives such as City Mayor, Ward Commissioners, Member of Parliament (MP) and other NGO officials. They often act as the gatekeepers of the Dalit community.

3.3 Income, Expenditure and Savings

Urban Dalits do not have diverse sources of income. Generally, their only income comes from cleaning and sweeping jobs at public and private sectors. However, there are other sources of income such as money lending, liquor selling and rearing of pigs. The study findings show that Dalits who work in government hospitals and railways mostly on a master roll have a fixed monthly income of BDT 1200. As the income from their jobs is inadequate to meet their basic daily needs, they are forced to find an additional income through manual scavenging for their survival.

The pattern of expenditures varies across households depending on the number and nature of work the members of households are involved. Housewives complain that their counterpart spend less on household needs and more on their personal needs. Expenses on the consumption of alcohol by the husbands was found to be higher in some households.

The study indicates that there are some Dalits who have the tendency to save money, while a large number of Dalits are found to have a mixed attitude towards savings. The willingness to save and not to save depends on whether the Dalits have surpluses after meeting their basic needs and expenditures. Except a few, most Dalits have no way to save money.

3.4 Health and Hygiene Scenario

Government being the basic service provider does not provide regular and adequate utility services to urban Dalit communities. The overall unhygienic situations in their community where they live in make them vulnerable to health and diseases. Scarcity of safe water, inadequate sanitation & drainage system, lack of hygiene, lack of knowledge of proper menstrual hygiene management, lack of solid waste disposal management system, congested & unhygienic living space are the severe problem & health hazards for the urban Dalits under this study. They live in a congested & unhygienic living space and are exposed to many water borne diseases.

The water and sanitation facilities are very poor and inadequate which has a direct impact on health and hygiene of urban Dalits. There are some tube wells, open bathrooms and toilets in the colonies they live in. Some tube wells are installed near the latrines. Some latrines are unhygienic and without a tank. There are some hanging latrines in some selected areas and sludge is being directly disposed to the nearest long ditch through a pipeline, which in turn creates unhygienic conditions.

In the Dalit community maximum diseases are water borne and some of the diseases are caused due to unhygienic living conditions. Diseases such as itching, fever, gastro-intestinal diseases, and headache are common in the community.

Study suggests that Dalit took some treatments during their sickness. However, they go to different health providers for their treatment. Dalits in hospital colonies prefer to go to allopathic treatment from government and private hospitals and to a nearby allopathic pharmacy whereas Dalit living in railway colonies sometimes prefer to go to homeopathic, herbal and *Kobiraji* (a local healing based on herbal medicine) treatments.

3.5 Kinship and Marriage

Kinship ties play a significant role in the lives and livelihoods of urban Dalits. Two forms of kinships are dominant among urban Dalits- kinship through marriage and kinship through blood. Also, fictive kinship known as *Patano* relationship is also practiced but not very common. As a bounded community, marriage is possible among themselves preferably in line with their respective caste. Monogamy is a dominant practice. However, data suggest that, although very rare, inter-caste or inter-religious love affairs or marriages between the 'Dalit' and 'Non-Dalit' boys and girls also occur. Marriage outside their community often occurs without the knowledge of their Dalit identity by other

party. If and when Dalit identity is revealed, most marriages end up in divorce. Visits by the close relatives are common. They have relatives across Dalit community in Bangladesh. Some families entertain relatives from India as well. This kinship networks plays important roles in their lives. These days, they are connected through mobile phones. Close kins also help each other at the time of their dire needs. Some also act as matchmaker in marriage by exchanging information about the prospective bride and grooms and their families.

The practice of dowry is very common in the marriage. The amount of dowry depends on various factors. Along with other material possessions such as wristwatch, cycle, television and phone, the transaction of cash as dowry is very popular among the urban Dalits. The amount of cash can range between BDT 500,000 to BDT 50,000 to say the least. Boys with jobs in public sectors demand high amount of cash at the time of negotiations. This has a negative impact on Dalit household expenditure. Often, they take loans with high interest to pay for the dowry. The interest rate is so high that the borrower family has to work extra hours, cannot afford any savings, and cut down other essential expenditure such as food, medial expanses to repay the loans.

3.6 Dispute Resolutions

Dispute among Dalits community are neither very common nor rare. According to the degree and nature of disputes they seek resolution from different Dalit members. For casual fights between household members such as between boys and girls are solved by the senior family members of disputed households. For other disputes of serious nature such as competition for dominance in the community or a long rivalry between two kin groups, they go to their *Mondal* or *Mondali*. They usually are the senior Dalit members with more life experience, status and power. In recent times, NGOs presence in Dalit's community gave Dalits some desire for leadership in their community. Often, Dalits compete with each other to take leadership positions in different regional and national committees of community-based organizations sponsored and supported by various associations and networks of non-profit organizations working on Dalit's welfare. Along with NGOs, community leaders also maintains or hope to maintain close connections with other important and powerful external stakeholders such as city Mayor, chairmen of *Pouroshavas*, Ward Commissioners, Police and Member of Parliaments to seek suggestions and press their community demands on matters of concern.

Chapter 4

Process of Marginalization

In scholarly literature, some scholars consider social exclusion to be synonymous to poverty, while others consider it as a means to explain poverty. Social exclusion can be defined as the “inability to participate effectively in economic, social, political and cultural life and, in some characteristics, alienation and distance from mainstream society” (Duffy 1995: 17). Social exclusion is a multidimensional concept (Room 1995: 3). Scholarly literature on Dalit Communities explores how the Dalit struggle to survive in Bangladesh they lack basic services and live with no or inadequate housing. Therefore, researchers need to consider the following.

4.1 Access to Land

Access to land is a common problem among Dalit communities in Bangladesh. However, the nature of problems varies between the Dalits living in urban and the Dalits living in rural areas. Due to the scope of this study, challenges to access to land among urban Dalits are discussed. As historical documents suggest, during the British colonial period, the British authority brought urban Dalits especially the *Horijans* from different parts of Indian sub-continent such as Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Bihar to do the cleaning and sweeping jobs in railways, hospitals. Today’s Dalits area is the descent of those brought for more than two hundred years ago. They live in colonies adjacent to railway stations and hospitals. The age of their colonies is as old as the age of the railways and hospitals.

Encroachment of Dalit’s lands by the mainstream Bengalis is a big problem especially for the Dalits living in railway colonies. Due to rapid urbanization, internal migration and a price hike of urban lands, Bengalis tend to grab the living spaces of urban Dalits. Some local politicians with the support from government officials attempted to build commercial buildings on their lands for profit. Dalit’s lack of political power and patronage to resist and a lack of government supervision, made it easier for Bengalis migrants with support from other politically influential locals to establish their homes in and around Dalit’s living spaces. Thus, Dalits have a fear that they will lose their generation-old living spaces if these trends of encroachments continue.

Buying and selling of legal lands is the constitutional rights of every citizen. However, due to Dalit’s ‘untouchable’ social status, they can hardly buy and sell any land in Bangladesh for their own use. In the recent past, some Dalits attempted to buy some lands but as their Bengali neighbors refuse to live next to them, they were forced to sell that land. Field data also suggest that only a few Dalits in railway colonies were able to get lands on lease from the government. Owning a lease contract somewhat give them a legal guarantee to avoid future eviction. During FGDs, it is found that all Dalits across age and gender are very worried about the fear of eviction. Almost all of them requested the research team if there is anything we can do to help them stop the future eviction.

Case Study 01

Saju Lal Bashphore, 45 years old Dalit, is the victim of forced eviction. He mentioned that today's *Harijon* compound in Rangpur hospital has been given to them by the British Government during the partition in 1947. They have been living there for generations since then. The British authority gave them the land and their forefathers constructed tin-shed housing on that land.

He said due to rapid urbanization, the price of land in cities like Rangpur went up in the last 10 years. This price hike of land led many local powerful political elites to grab government lands to make business ventures. In association with local law enforcement agencies, local political elites and some businessman, the Rangpur City Corporation, planned to build a shopping mall near the Dalit living compounds. In June 2015, Rangpur City Corporation managed to build a shopping mall on the land and the Corporation claimed that the land on which the mall has been built belongs to the Corporation not to the Dalits. However, due to this construction, some Dalits lost their homes where they have been living for generations.

Saju mentioned that in the early months of 2015, the city corporations issued an eviction letter to him as the corporation planned to construct a shopping center. After 15 days, Saju received another letter of eviction saying the city corporation will destroy his house and belongings if he does not leave his home by certain date. He had no clue what to do and where to go after receiving that letter. He tried to talk to some people in the city corporation but was unsuccessful. After a few days, the City Corporation Mayor along with some local powerful politicians and law enforcing agencies came to their compound and demolished his house. Despite his earnest request, he could not stop the demolition of his house. However, he mentioned that they gave him 5-6 thousand BDT in cash and a bundle of tin to construct another house, which according to him is not enough at all to build a new home. Currently, Saju is living at an adjacent low-land of the main compound of the Dalit community. However, he still fears that the City Corporation Authority may come one day and force him to leave again!

4.2 Access to Economic Resources and Loss of Traditional Jobs

Urban Dalits have no or very limited access to means of production such as land and capital. Thus, they find it very difficult to find an employment or to start a small business of their own. They are denied socially to have access to any jobs and business other than their traditional profession of cleaning and sweeping.

Although no hard evidence was found, many Dalits mentioned that in the past, some of them applied for some white-color jobs by hiding their identity. But when their identity is revealed by their last name or by their distinct accent, they were denied the jobs. Frustrated by this denial from the mainstream society, many of them are forced to join in their traditional jobs despite having the required qualifications for other white color jobs.

To start a small business on their own, they lack start-up capitals, required knowledge, skill and capacity. Some NGOs provided trainings on skills development such as shopkeepers; motor mechanic and cell phone repairing to

help some Dalit youths to start small business but these initiatives did not yield much success due to various factors. Among those factors, Dalit identity has been their biggest obstacles to become successful entrepreneurs. Some mentioned, they lose their business clients, mostly mainstream Bengali people, when their identity is revealed. Other factors include lack of start-up capital, lack of know-how of interpersonal communication, and their inability to overcome challenges in entrepreneurship.

Dalits are losing their traditional jobs as cleaner and sweeper. Although the Government has renewed its directives to secure 80% of cleaning and sweeping jobs for the Dalits, but in reality, it is hardly practiced. The malpractices in the job recruitment are evident.

Lately, the recruitment for cleaning and sweeping jobs in government hospitals and railways has become more formal. These days job announcement are being published in national and local newspapers, the minimum educational requirements move up to the completion of class eight (08). In the recruitment process, the government has introduced a written examination followed by an oral examination for the applicants. As past studies on Dalit suggest that the level of education of Dalits has historically been very low. Thus, these days a lot of Dalits even do not qualify to apply for their traditional jobs. In addition, a lack in their social mobility and communication competence are major constraints for Dalits to go outside of their locality to attend the written or oral examinations often held in a big city like Dhaka.

It is part of the public discourses that to get a cleaning and sweeping job in hospitals, railways and municipalities, one needs either bribe or a favor from government high officials or politicians. Data suggest that as Dalits can hardly meet their daily expenses, they are unable to arrange the money to pay bribes and are being deprived of getting the traditional jobs they are entitled to. Both Bengali Muslims and Hindus who can arrange the money for the bribe are competing for their jobs. Amount of bribe for a cleaning/sweeping job ranges from BDT 100,000 to 300,000, depending on the negotiation skills, references and mutual understandings between the agents of employer and the job seekers. Data also shows that some Dalits managed to get cleaning/sweeping jobs by capitalizing their good relationship with railways officials and other influential local politicians such as MPs and in one case a Minister also helped.

It is learnt from the study that as government jobs offers relatively better salary and benefit package than other private jobs of similar kinds, many Bengalis have become more interested to get those jobs through bribes. The sources of bribe money by Bengali Muslims and Hindus are through savings, borrowing or selling off their lands in the village what is not possible for many Dalits with no lands or any other material possessions to sell off.

Case study 02

Sajib Bashphore, a young man from Rangpur, expressed his anger and frustration about securing government jobs for Dalits. He mentioned that unemployment is a major problem among the urban Dalits in Bangladesh. In the past, securing the

traditional sweeping and cleaning jobs in government offices was relatively easy for urban Dalits. Unlike their older generation, young and adults of today's Dalit are facing huge unemployment problems in government services.

He mentioned that a relatively better salary package and job security in government services, attracted non-Dalits, mostly Muslims from dominant society, to becoming more interested for sweeping and cleaning jobs in government sectors. In addition, he also said that nowadays, the minimum educational requirement for applicants for government jobs is the completion of eighth grades which made it very difficult for Dalits with high level of drop-out rates. These are the main two reasons that drive off Dalits in finding their traditional jobs in government sectors as mentioned by Sajib.

He also said that the competition for those jobs is not based on fair practices. Malpractices such as offering the bribes in the job recruitment are common. The usual rate for a cleaning job in government railway or hospitals ranges from BDT 1,00,000 to 4,00,000. This is quite a large amount of money for Dalits in the event they are willing to pay the bribe. On the other hand, Muslims and Hindus although not economically rich, often manage that amount to pay the bribe to secure the jobs. The sources of money for the bribe for non-Dalits as he said usually are the selling of their jewelry, lands in rural areas, savings and borrowing from relatives, etc. Dalits hardly can manage that money as they have no land to sell off, savings, jewelry and thus being deprived of their traditional jobs in government services.

Due to social stigma as *Harijans*, they are not welcomed or even qualified to compete for other jobs beyond their traditional ones. A huge number of young Dalits are being frustrated about their life and livelihood. They are left with only two options, 1) do the cleaning jobs on behalf of the government job holders as a sub-contractor with very low and irregular payment, or 2) independent manual scavenging (*baltir kaj*) which is labor intensive, unhealthy and disgraceful. Sajib mentioned, sometimes, by hiding their identity, young Dalit men migrate to cities with a hope for other jobs such as motor mechanic and machine operators.

Sajib, like many of his community, refuses to hide their identity. He said 'I am proud of my last name and identity. I want to keep my identity and want to work my traditional jobs like my forefathers. If and when I am given other decent job, I am willing to take up those jobs as well.' He also thinks that lack of job and uncertainty in jobs are forcing young Dalits to take and trade drugs.

4.3 Exclusion in Public Spaces

Urban Dalits have limited access to public places, shops and restaurants, barbershops, playgrounds, movie theatres, burial grounds, social gatherings, temples, music concerts and cultural events. Urban Dalits in Bangladesh usually perform the most menial jobs or tasks that are deemed too 'polluting' or degrading for non-Dalits. Investigating into their daily routine reveals that most Dalits involved in manual scavenging do not have their breakfast at home. When they try to eat at restaurants in the morning, they are not allowed to enter into. They sit outside the restaurants where food is handed over to them on the plates and glasses carried by them. However, by hiding their identity, they can enter into

restaurants located far away from their locality. Local barber shops refuse to provide them the service, worship places will not let them get into the temples, and shops in the markets will not allow them to sit in. Some initiatives by local NGOs such as raising awareness and lobbying with local business associations, market committees and society at large helped to solve the problems for a short period of time in some areas. However, business owners complained that they incur loss if Dalits are allowed to get into as when seen by the customers belonging in the mainstream society, they refuse to come to their shops and restaurants again.

Qualitative data suggest that Dalit communities expressed their serious disappointment, as they are not allowed to use public spaces like other citizens. They raised questions “if our traditional work is considered ‘dirty’ and the reason for our social exclusion then when the mainstream Bengalis are doing the similar works like us, then how come they be allowed into the public places like restaurants and temples.”

4.4 Situation of Women

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 characterize 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. As male are the bread earners, Dalit women are economically dependent on them. In the event of women becoming abandoned or widowed, they find it very difficult to survive. In some caste, a widow is not allowed to get married again. Incidence of domestic violence is common. Married Dalit women are often yelled at and beaten by their husbands especially when husbands are drunk or run out of money.

Dalits girls feel insecure at public places. Data shows that teasing, bullying and sexual harassment by mainstream young boys is not very uncommon among the Dalit girls when they go to public places such as shopping centers, schools and parks.

The constitution of People's Republic of Bangladesh, the supreme law of the land, Section 27 and 28 a and 29 states it will ensure equal rights for all disadvantaged groups of citizens and ratification of numerous international and UN conventions (e.g. on Civil and Political Rights, Rights of the Child, Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women and all forms of Racial Discrimination) allowing Dalits to put pressure to the government of Bangladesh to materialize its national and international obligations and commitment. Sadly, the issues of Dalit has until very recently been ignored or denied by the Government, donors and civil society. There is still relatively little national or international awareness of the extreme poverty and exclusion facing Dalits in Bangladesh and there have been no systematic efforts made to identify and implement measures for the inclusion and equal treatment of Dalits in society. Keeping these national and international laws, future interventions to bring economic, social, political and cultural justice for Dalits can well be protected.

Chapter 5

Crisis of Identity

In the previous chapters, some aspects of Dalit's life have been described. This chapter aims to show that Dalit community as a living space provides food for thoughts on their belongingness to culture and society. This reveals some issues of Dalit's life that reminds us of this community as a social site who always negotiate different strategies to co-exist with the mainstream society.

5.1 Identity

Identity crisis among the Dalits is common. As citizens of this country, all Dalits are entitled to enjoy all the constitutional rights. In most cases, urban Dalits in selected areas do not have a clear idea about what their constitutional rights are. They have some idea about their voting rights though. However, most Dalits wonder and are suspicious about enjoying their other rights as citizen of the country. Their social identity as Dalits always makes them feel that they are not equal to other citizens. However, after the various interventions by NGOs, Dalit networks, federations and organizations such as Harijan Okkyo Parishad, BDERM, NNMC, IDSN, and BDEFW, urban Dalits are becoming more aware of their rights and entitlements. Dalits are worried and frustrated about how they are perceived by the wider society. Most Dalits start to believe that the rest of the society will never accept them if their identity as Dalits is revealed.

Urban Dalits such as *Harijans* are known to wider Bangladeshi society as dirty and alcoholic. Dirty as the wider society perceive due to their professional works in cleaning the toilets and their personal hygiene. Also, they are considered dirty as they eat pork that is strictly prohibited as '*haram*' food in Islamic discourse. They are also perceived as '*alcoholic*', which is also prohibited in Islam. The outsiders have created an image of *Harijans* who do dirty works, eat pork, drink alcohol and has uncouth attitude. Due to these pervasive and hegemonic perceptions even Dalits started to view themselves as such and ultimately accept their identity construction as normal. Thus, economic, social, political and other forms of injustices towards urban Dalits became natural and the root causes of their social exclusion remain unchallenged and unquestioned.

Dalits are not allowed to go to public spaces such restaurants, worship places, cannot borrow utensils from the local decorators. This remains a major source of their sense of alienation from the wider society. This sense of insecurity constantly hunts them down and therefore they disconnect themselves from the mainstream society. Due to NGO activities in the last 15 years, Dalits are becoming more aware of their rights and entitlement than the past. All Dalits want to articulate and enjoy their economic, social and cultural rights in the society.

5.2 Negotiations

Not all Dalit members accept the social exclusion and discrimination against them by the state and mainstream Bengali society. Some Dalit members adopt different strategies to negotiate and navigate to interact with the dominant Bengali society. The two most popular strategies Dalit practice to avoid social exclusion is

migration and hiding of their identity. Field data suggest that some urban Dalits who were fortunate enough to have some level of education and social capital, migrated to a different locations of Bangladesh to find employment and to enjoy their life as a Bengali citizen. There are instances, where some Dalits also hide their last name to avoid social discriminations in getting formal jobs in the mainstream society.

5.3 Dynamics of Social Change

In contemporary societies, population growth, technology, globalization education and access to economic resources are the main driving forces for social changes. Due to population growth, urban Dalits also experienced some changes over time however; the pace of that change is very slow. As 'untouchables', they are stuck with their traditional jobs for generations with no or limited access to land, health, education, capital and other basic services. The high degree of poverty, social exclusion, injustice and discriminations restricts the upward social mobility of urban Dalit community. For some Dalits, social mobility was possible through hiding their identity, internal migration, and doing illegal drug business and money lending in their own community. In a closed society like this, individual Dalit member lacks inner competition and motivation to work harder to change their fortune in the future. They feel that they are stuck in a tunnel where they do not see any lights at the end of that tunnel. If and when larger society provides a pathway for them to reach to a goal of their lives where they can have a decent life, it would foster the motivations for them to change themselves for a better future.

Currently, moneylenders are the only households who are economically rich and can move up their economic conditions by lending more money. During FGDs, especially the youth expressed their frustrations and goes on saying that due to these economically rich moneylenders, the overall conditions of Dalits will never improve. One young boy mentioned, rich Dalits have money, influence and power to lobby, negotiate and demand the basic rights of Dalits from the Government. Instead, they do just the opposite. They rather exploit our situations. One said, moneylenders want our economic dependency as we depend more on them financially, then they become prosperous. In one FGD, one senior lady, at the presence of powerful moneylender even expressed her fear to speak up.

From the perspectives of economic mobility, it can be said that only a few numbers of households who can earn hard cash through money lending or some other illegal business such as selling off drugs and alcohol, or members who earn hard cash as dowry or members who work hard and can save up some money have the possibility for upward economic mobility. It is also found that Dalit members who are relatively well off try to copy the life style of Bengali dominant class by gaining and consuming different social class markers and thus try to differentiate them from the 'ordinary' Dalits.

Although urban Dalits encounter similar injustice, discriminations and sufferings across Bangladesh, they are not homogenous. They are divided in line with age, gender, caste, religions and 'economic class'. Thus, the heterogeneity in the community leaves many individuals with varied degree of power and agency. For

example, moneylenders, government permanent job holders, persons with lot of pigs, individuals with social connections toward powerful locals, and central political elites exert more power and authority over 'ordinary' Dalits without money, jobs and social connections toward government people. The powerful individuals act as gatekeepers of their community. Their economic resources, gender and age also provide them certain power and authority in the community. Often, senior male members with social acceptance enjoy more power than the women.

A sharp difference in opinion was found in young and older Dalit members, while explored 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. They said rearing of children and taking care of the family is also very important for them thus they want to balance out both work and family and they prefer works that can be done from home.

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 for their jobs and a salary they can make a living with. Younger generations expect a change, and they want that change 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. When reminded, how similar programs by NGOs in the past failed, they mentioned 'you picked the wrong persons, give us a chance we will prove you wrong!'

For example, the younger generation is not happy about the fact that they cannot have access to social, economic and cultural spaces in mainstream societies. They asked angrily to the researchers 'Are we not human?', 'Are we not citizens of this country?'

Some young Dalits have access to the internet technology through mobile phones, they watch television at home and listen to music and many of them also have friends in mainstream society. During FGDs some of them mentioned my Bengali friends do not mind being a friend of me. We hang out together take tea together and roam around the city. When asked, do they visit your house? Some says yes, they come during puja and other occasions but some still hesitate to eat our homemade foods.

5.4 GO/NGO Interventions for Urban Dalits

In theory, Dalits in urban Bangladesh especially the *Harijans* are entitled to get into their traditional sweeping and cleaning jobs in railways, government hospitals and Municipalities. Field data reveals the incidences of unfair practices in job recruitments for Dalits. A decline in the usage of traditional latrines, growth of population and traditional sweeping and cleaning jobs being taken away by the Bengali people, made urban Dalits more vulnerable to remain in their traditional jobs. Thus, they are forced to look for alternative jobs. Without any alternative income generating activity, many Dalits are forced to continue their

traditional jobs as part timer and independent manual scavenging as means of their economic survival, which is also declining. As mainstream society put a strong stigma on Dalits, it is even harder for Dalit to get involved in any income generating activities compared to other economically marginalized people of mainstream society. If Government and international donors remain indifferent, it will not help Dalit's cause at all. Thus, mobilizing, organizing, awareness raising, advocacy and lobbying, and eventually capacity building of state institutions are very important.

As mentioned before, government initiatives for the betterment of urban Dalits are near zero. In recent years, to respond to the pressure from various national and international organizations, associations, networks, and civil society activism, government has allocated an increased budget for the betterment of Dalit lives and livelihood. However, the government allocation is far from the actual needs of the Dalits.

Non-state initiatives for the betterment of Dalits are evident but very sporadic and adequate. Most programs aim at organizing Dalit and making them aware of their right and entitlements. These initiatives are a good way to help Dalits organize themselves to uphold their constitutional rights. However, these awareness programs alone are not sufficient for a broad-based, meaningful and effective participation of Dalits in mainstream societies. By and large, NGO initiatives have been very positive to help organize and aware urban Dalits of their rights and entitlements. Dalits specifically the urban Dalits are more aware of their rights compare to their previous generations. NGOs advocacy and lobby with powerful national and international organizations like the UN, EU and respective government line ministries played a role to bring Dalit issues in national policy discourses. But, there is no or only a little systemic change happening in the lives of urban Dalit. As a most vulnerable group in the society the Dalit community requires an urgent and robust attempt that is absent in all quarters in Bangladesh.

To help improve the socio economic conditions and social inclusion of urban Dalits, the initiatives by HEKS/EPER - an international donor is worth mentioning here. The large part of HEKS/EPER country program is organizing and making them aware of their rights. However, it is not enough to create a momentum but needs more networking, advocacy and especially also more joint actions with mainstream society. Lately HEKS/EPER adopted an inclusive approach to integrate the Dalit in the market. It seems that economic opportunities (Inclusive Market Development Approach) in combination with awareness rising and advocacy (HRBA) can result in social inclusion which means equal rights, equal opportunities and active participation in society in all aspects of life, including civic, social, economic, and political activities, as well as participation in decision-making processes.

HEKS/EPER and its partner organizations such as ESDO, GBK, ARCO, and SERP have been trying with the technical support of Practical Action to improve the socio economic conditions of Dalits and Adibashi (indigenous) in project areas in Bangladesh through an Inclusive Market Development (IMD) approach by providing some alternative livelihood options in sub-sectors like beef and native

chicken. The program seems to provide better result, especially the beef-fattening component, than their previous IGAs (Income Generating Activities) programs. To help tackle the huge unemployment and a reduction in their traditional jobs among Dalits, HEKS/EPER current IMD approach seems to have huge potential in the future.

Another initiative by GBK is the creation of a HOME for young male and female from Dalit community. HOME has become a source of inspiration for the urban Dalit in project areas. Field data suggest that GBK with an aim to integrate the Dalit community in the mainstream society founded HOME as a center to provide them values and skills deemed necessary for successful inclusion in the mainstream society.

The long term goal for HOME is to create role models in Dalit community who in turn after the successful integration in the mainstream society through education and income can contribute more to their own community. However, the opinion of GBK management suggests that they find it difficult to get the expected roles from their students after they graduate. In addition, the issues of long-term sustainability and value for money for such initiatives and the Dalits' dependency on external stakeholders such as HOME amplify their lack of motivation and drive to look for other strategies for successful integration in the mainstream society.

Challenges of NGOs and INGOs in working with the urban Dalits are manifold. The Dalit community has a complex dynamics in social and behavioral change and their interaction with mainstream society has also become more complex. Thus, a multi-dimensional and highly coordinated framework of intervention is required.

5.5 Dalit's views on Social Inclusion Interventions by NGOs

Urban Dalits under this study expressed a lot of respect for and confidence on NGO led development interventions. They are happy to see NGO officials coming, greeting and meeting with them frequently and seeking their opinion on many issues of their concern. To them, 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 organize 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. However, some of them also mentioned that NGO alone couldn't do if the government is not supportive to us. They stated their fear of eviction and demanded that the NGO should do lobby with the government on their behalf so that the government does not evict them.

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