



The Nature of Caste-based Society: Evidence from India and Bangladesh

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Abstract

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Although both constitutions of India and Bangladesh promise equal rights for their entire citizens, the Dalit community is treated as untouchables and is hated by society. Most of the people suffering from caste discrimination are Dalits in India and Bangladesh. They have fared worse than the upper caste groups regarding educational and occupational attainment, wages and consumption, and business ownership. The challenges to thoroughly enjoying fundamental human rights for Dalits in India and Bangladesh include lack of access to education, poverty, health and housing problems, and unequal access to employment. Dalits are still facing social problems owing to the stigma of untouchability and low caste, despite the constitutional provisions against caste-based discrimination. But, it is a ray of hope that caste discrimination has decreased over time in India and Bangladesh with considerable differences in practices in various states and regions. The paper is mainly based on secondary data, and content analysis has been applied as a method. It tries to assess the pattern of caste-based discrimination among the Dalit people of India and Bangladesh.

Keywords

Dalit, caste, untouchability, inequality, discrimination, India, Bangladesh

1. Introduction

The caste system is regarded as a Hindu tradition originated in India but affects people across religious and national boundaries of the sub-continent. India and Bangladesh are both South Asian countries that share borders and many other cultural traits. The Indian state of West Bengal surrounds the western part of Bangladesh. The people of West Bengal and Bangladesh are Bengali-speaking and their culture is almost similar. India is ranked second in the world's population and 7th largest country. It has a total area of 3,166,391 sq. km. with an estimated population of 1.41 billion. Meanwhile, Bangladesh is considered a densely populated country with 1.65 million people living in an area of 147,570 sq. km. The predominant religious group in Bangladesh is Muslim, while most people in India practice Hinduism. Bengali is the primary language in Bangladesh, while both Hindi and English are considered official languages in India. So, many similar characteristics exist between these two neighboring countries. Caste discrimination among marginalized people is also common in both countries.

Caste discrimination is one of the most crucial human rights issues in the present world, adversely affecting more than 260 million people globally. The caste and practice of untouchability have long been known as a particular cultural practice of the people of India and Bangladesh, particularly the Hindus.¹ Most people suffering from caste discrimination are *Dalits* in India and Bangladesh. Caste can be defined as a hereditary and hierarchic system of social grouping distinguished by degrees of purity, social status, and exclusiveness. The stigma associated with being low caste (*dalit*) means that individuals are not viewed based on their merits but through the lenses of their collective stigmatized caste identity.² Those who do not belong to any of the four *varnas* are considered impure and thus defiled to other caste groups. They are seen as untouchables, are named as scheduled caste, and have chosen the name *Dalits* for themselves. *Dalits* also known as untouchables are members of the lowest social group in the Hindu caste system. The word *Dalit*, meaning oppressed or broken, is the name given to members of this group by themselves in the 1930s. They are born below the caste system. They suffer from discrimination influencing all spheres of life and violating a cross-section of fundamental human rights.

2. Objectives

This paper examines the nature and extent of untouchability, descent, and work-based discrimination and social exclusion in contemporary Indian and Bangladeshi societies through an intensive literature review. The specific objectives are as follows:

- i) To determine whether the socio-economic status among the *Dalits* in India and Bangladesh are changing.
- ii) To investigate the challenges and factors for improving the status of *Dalits* in India and Bangladesh.

3. Methodology

The present paper is mainly based on secondary sources of data. Considering the nature of the article, content analysis is used as a method. Relevant data for the paper have been collected from different books, journals, monthly and weekly magazines, souvenirs, dailies' government and non-government reports, and websites. A review of some relevant literature on the inequality of *Dalits* in India and Bangladesh has also been done. Collected data have been arranged and analyzed with the statistical technique and interpreted in a descriptive and tabular form.

4. Statement of the Problem

“It was then for the first time that I learned that a person who is to a Hindu is also an untouchable to a Parsi”³

Caste-based discrimination requires socio-economic exclusion, exclusion in housing, denial and restrictions of access to public and private services, and employment and enforcement of certain types of jobs on *Dalits*, resulting in a system of modern-time slavery or bonded labor. Among the impediments to addressing caste discrimination is either a lack of law or a de facto denial of equality before the law, ensuing in the absence of protection of caste-affected people against violent attacks and other crimes and impunity for such crimes. It is said that caste discrimination violates human rights and is a major impediment to attaining development goals. Victims of caste discrimination are denied access to water, land, education, health service, and employment. The

exclusion of *Dalits* and similarly affected communities by other groups in society lead to extreme poverty among affected population groups reduces benefits from development processes, and bars their involvement in decision-making and meaningful participation in public and civil life.

Dalit Community is not a caste or a group of castes, but a population marginalized to the extreme by partly religious sanctions and partly by socio-economic deficits. *Dalits* are a very distinct social group in the caste-ridden Hindu society. They are the victims of social incapacities and oppression economically; most of them are still the poorest of the poor.⁴ They are socially and financially deprived and forced to work under terrible conditions at the lowest return for their labour.⁵ The caste system comprises four hierarchical classes, or *varnas*, the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaisyas, and Shudras. Certain population groups, known today as *Dalits*, were historically excluded from the caste system and were regarded as untouchables.⁶ Actually, they were separated from mainstream people in society. They were customarily related to some odd jobs. Due to a lack of adequate education and employment, the livelihood of the majority of *Dalits* is dependent on their traditional occupations. Nowadays, the practice of untouchability is prohibited by the government, but this tradition has been experienced in many disguises in several areas in India and Bangladesh. In the age of globalization and information technology, *Dalits* are continually suffering from various types of discrimination in both urban and rural areas.⁷

Although these people play a significant role in the country's economic, environmental, and social development, the *Dalits* are one of the most economically marginalized and socially excluded groups in Bangladesh.⁸ In this connection, a comparative analysis of the situations of Indian and Bangladeshi *Dalits* has been made to illustrate the relevant matter. Because most of the people of India are Hindu and a significant number of *Dalits* is inhabited here. On the other hand, Islam is the predominant religion in Bangladesh. Like its neighborhood, this country also has a *Dalit* population. The question that guided the whole analysis is how caste inequality works beyond its specific religious boundary.

4.1 India

Indian culture is considered a combination of several cultures. It has been influenced by a history that is several millennia old, beginning with the Indus Valley civilization and other early cultural areas. Cultural diversity is one of the core characteristics of India. The majority of the people in India practice Hinduism. According to the 2011 census, 79.8% of the Population of India practices Hinduism. Islam (14.2%), Christianity (2.3%), Sikhism (1.7%), Buddhism (0.7%), and Jainism (0.4%) are the other major religions followed by the people of India. India's caste system is perhaps the world's longest-surviving societal hierarchy. Caste is certainly an all-India phenomenon in the sense that there are hereditary, endogamous groups that form a hierarchy and each has a traditional link with one or two occupations.⁹ There are 3,000 castes and 25,000 sub-castes in India, each related to a specific field. In India, caste is a significant social identity where discriminatory practices have resulted in poor outcomes for the lower castes.¹⁰ Caste-based discrimination is acute among the Hindu religious dominant community like *Dalit* in India. Estimation of the total *Dalit* population, including Muslims and Christians comes in at 200 million people. The report of the Sachar committee documents widespread caste-based discrimination within Muslim communities in India. As in India, the government has committed itself to develop policies aimed at the socio-economic progress of the *Dalits* population.

4.2 Bangladesh

The dominant socio-cultural feature of Bangladesh is a blend of Bengali culture along with Muslim traditions. Among various religious groups, Muslims represent 91.04% majority and non-Muslims constitute the remaining 8.96% of Bangladesh's population.¹¹ As per the 2011 census, among the non-Muslims, Hindus are the dominant group with a population of 8.54%, Buddhist 0.61%, Christians 0.30% and others 0.12%.¹² Regarding population, Bangladesh is the 3rd largest Hindu state in the world after India and Nepal. An estimated 5.5 million Hindu *dalits* live in 63 districts in Bangladesh.¹³ Most represent the most marginalized and deprived sections of Bangladeshi society. *Dalits* in Bangladesh originally migrated from India under the British rule and remained after the

partition of India in 1947. They worked principally as municipal cleaners and domestic workers, lowly jobs shunned by the country.

Caste-based discrimination also exists in Bangladesh society. For instance, *Dalits* here are primarily identified with their traditional occupations, such as fishermen, sweepers, barbers, washermen, blacksmiths, cobblers, and oil pressers. The people engaged in these occupations face various forms of disparity in society. They face discrimination at all levels of social interaction levels, such as from hotels to hair-cutting saloons, from temples to mosques and schools.¹⁴ They continue to inhabit the dirty and polluted environment, either in public housing provided by the local municipalities or privately arranged housing in the slums/ squatters in and around the semi-urban and rural areas. The *Dalits* are located in uncongenial places, at the fringes of villages. Based on economic activities, about 1.11% of *Dalits* are engaged.¹⁵ Though the estimation of the population of *Dalits* varies from one source to another, however, It is approximated that 5.5 million *Dalits* are isolated upon their professions and castes.¹⁶

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Results

Although the constitutions of India and Bangladesh promise equal rights for all their citizens, thousands of members of the *Dalit* community are treated as untouchables and are hated by mainstream society. The equal rights for all citizens and the prohibition of discrimination by the state on the grounds of religion, race, caste, sex, or place of birth are guaranteed in the constitutions of both countries.¹⁷ Despite constitutional guarantees, political-economic and social exclusion based on caste is practiced across the two countries, as such social exclusion is manifested in the physical structure of both rural and urban areas throughout both countries.

5.1.1 State of Dalits in India

Indian society is like an asylum where people of different religions, caste, and creeds take shelter. These people have distinctive cultural practices and traditions which make India more inclusive. But do these people get similar treatment from the Indian state?

In India, *Dalits* popularly known as scheduled castes constitute a significant portion (16.2%) of the Indian population.¹⁸ In 1932, the term scheduled castes were invented to describe some castes that were considered untouchables in the past. Untouchability was a set of social customs that restricted a class of people from participating in the wider society. These customs included: denial of participation in the public sphere, limitation on entering temples or other religious institutions, prohibition on reading *the Veda* or becoming a priest, forced isolation, restriction on basic needs and luxury commodities, and obligation to do odd jobs. In short, this social custom was the reason which made the lives of *Dalits* people measurable.¹⁹ This custom was constitutionally abolished after the independence of India. But the exploitation and discrimination have not ended yet.

The caste system is a social stratification containing both social and class oppression. *Dalits* are victims of these two forms of oppression. According to Hans (2012), 86.25% of scheduled caste households are landless, while the main occupation of 49% of them in rural areas is agriculture.²⁰ Overall, *Dalit's* control over the resources of the country is negligible. Surprisingly, half of the *Dalit* population in modern India lives below the poverty line. Many *Dalits* don't have proper access to safe water. Still, *Dalits* don't have open access to tea stalls or restaurants in 30-40% of villages in India. Actually, direct contact with *Dalits* is avoided.²¹ Though they are still bearing the stigma of untouchables. People of wider society have an unchanging mindset about *Dalits*.²² This is not the only scenario of Hinduism. Religious conversion can't change the fates of Indian *Dalits*. In India, Christianity, Sikhism, and Islam also practice caste that isolated *Dalits* from mainstream society.²³

Dalits have to face caste-based violence too. Above 13 lakh cases of *Dalits* violence have been registered in different states of India (2018-2020). Among the states, violence against *Dalits* is most prevalent in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Rajasthan, and Madhya Pradesh. Still, many cases have remained unreported.²⁴ The frequency of caste-based violence was higher during the pandemic period.²⁵ One of the reasons is that many *Dalit* migrants have to return from overseas due to Covid-19. Most of the cases are simple injuries and

atrocities. But surprisingly, *Dalits* are facing more cruel types of violence in big cities rather than in rural areas. One of the significant reasons for these types of violence is to ensure caste supremacy.²⁶ Sometimes, police don't permit *Dalits* to register cases against caste-based violence. *Dalits* have to face more obstacles in entering religious institutions also. In many villages of India, *Dalits* don't have the right to use luxury products.²⁷ The situation of *Dalit* women is more complex than their male counterparts. They have to suffer from multiple exploitations regarding their classes, castes, and gender. Valarmathi et al (2017) investigate the reasons behind the backwardness of *Dalit* women in the educational, social, and financial spheres. Justifying Hindu religious scriptures helps portray *Dalit* women as sexual objects. They also legitimize different patriarchal customs²⁸ and violent behavior against *Dalit* women. Even these religious scriptures have the worst influence on the educational sphere of *Dalit* women. Other significant reasons for their lower literacy are poor socio-economic conditions, lack of educational resources, privatization of education, dowry, humiliation, and bullying.²⁹

Moreover, due to their untouchable stigma, they don't get good benefits from different state-sponsored development schemes.³⁰ On the other hand, they are to meet many difficulties within their patriarchal communities.³¹

It is not like there is a reservation for the jobs or education sector. According to the Indian constitution, there are sufficient reservations in education, politics, and employment for scheduled castes. But Roy (2014) reveals that *Dalits* can't take advantage of these reservations properly. Because they are to complete high school, which is quite luxurious to many of them, she also interprets how the caste system influences the employment sector of modern India. The business and corporate world is primarily dominated by *Vaishyas* whereas, *brahmins* hold the majority govt. jobs and intellectual positions. They also control the media which legitimates the supremacy of the upper castes. On the other hand, the number of *Dalits* is very minimal despite having reservations. They are still forced to do their traditional odd jobs. Moreover, privatization limits the scope of their traditional positions. Even sometimes, Indian migrant *Dalits* have to face

discrimination from their fellow countrymen.³²

From the above discussion, it is evident that the lives of *Dalits* in India can't be called satisfactory. Though untouchability is constitutionally prohibited, it is practiced in many disguises. *Dalits* have to suffer from different forms of discrimination only due to their caste identity.

5.1.2 Situations of Dalits in Bangladesh

Bangladesh is also known for its resilience and diversity. There are two types of *Dalits* here: Bangali *Dalits* and Non-Bangali *Dalits*. Of them, the untouchable groups of Bengali-speaking people are called Bengali *Dalits*.³³ Most of the Hindu *Dalits* of Bangladesh are believed to be descendants of migrants from the Indian current states of Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, and Madhya Pradesh. They were first brought to the city of Dhaka by the Mughal rulers in the early 17th century. However, a significant number of them came during the first half of the 19th century when the British rulers brought them for various kinds of menial services like cleaners, tea gardeners, jungle cleaners, and other cleaning jobs.³⁴

Though Bangladesh was formed as a secular, democratic country in 1971 after it separated from Pakistan, it has, over the years, developed majoritarian solid tendencies to discriminate against minorities. *Dalits*, who make up nearly one-fourth to one-fifth of the Bangladeshi Hindu population, become victims of mainstream society and caste untouchability.³⁵ Their representation in political institutions is abysmally low. Their economic conditions are comparatively bad, with most working in low-paying traditional caste occupations. Though Islam does not allow discrimination, few studies have incorporated evidence of caste-related discrimination in Muslim-dominated communities. In Bangladesh, many of them are remained underprivileged, for example, *Jola*, *Hajam*, *Bede*, *Bawali*, etc.

It is revealed that many *Dalits* received below the officially prescribed minimum wage. They have poor access to water, sanitation, and other public services. The condition of Muslim *Dalits* was worse than those of the Hindu *Dalits*. *Dalits* in Bangladesh also face

discrimination in the political sphere and in civic life. They are not treated well even by the doctors and nurses in hospitals and clinics. They are refused entry into their houses too. The Hindu *Dalits* faced much more discrimination in religious life. They were not allowed entry into temples and were discouraged from participating in religious/community functions.

Bangladesh is a Muslim-dominated country where Muslims shape the policy of the state. Still, Bangladesh's *Dalits* face many challenges due to their outcast identity. Several *Dalits* are engaged in cleaning jobs here. But other job groups can also be found. Most of them live in isolated colonies segregated from broader society. They don't have proper access to public spaces. A report illustrates these biased sections.³⁶ As *Dalits* are found to be living in filthy areas of cities, they are suffering from the lack of clean water. In rural areas, they often don't have permission to use water sources because of their identity. Even they can't rent or buy houses and land. In some areas, they are also facing discrimination in getting medical access. They face severe human rights violations, including abduction, rape, torture, destruction of houses, land grabbing, eviction from land, threats, and pressure. Moreover, the public health sector doesn't provide any special attention to the vulnerable health of *Dalits* further complicating the matter. As there exists no reservation for marginalized communities in the Bangladeshi parliamentary system, *Dalits* can seldom participate in public or political activities. Even sometimes, they have to face violence for their participation in the national election. Moreover, they have to face caste-based discrimination in the education sector. The situation of *Dalit* women is more complicated than other women. Bangladeshi women have to suffer a lot due to patriarchal structures in this country. They have to confront many difficulties in terms of class, caste, and gender identity. Alongside the overall deprivation of the community, they have to face wage discrimination and sometimes, sexual and physical harassment in the broader society. Moreover, patriarchal customs like early marriage make their reality more complex.³⁷

Sharif³⁸ mentioned the environment surrounding the *Dalits* colonies is quite unhealthy and congested. Quarters are only allotted for the cleaners who work in the government

job sector.³⁹ Other people made their homes adjacent to these quarters. This is illegal and these people are always afraid of eviction. But they don't have different ways because people don't allow them to rent due to their identity. The same thing happens in residing on their land. They are also facing discrimination in their job sector. In some cases, Bengali people grab their government jobs of cleaners with bribes or lobbying despite having reservations. On the other hand, they are losing their municipal jobs due to the inclusion of people in mainstream society. For example, *Dalit* women at Bhairab don't have the opportunity to work in the municipality. Moreover, they must bear different patriarchal customs and ignorance in their community. Interestingly, *Dalits* at Bhairab don't confront any obstacles in the educational sector. But they often can't utilize their qualifications because of their identity. They don't get jobs in the general sector for this reason. The development theorists assume that 'education can ensure the progress of any community can be questionable here. *Dalit* cleaners are popularly known as *Methors*. Some of their Muslim neighbors feel disgusted about them. They constantly justify their isolation. According to the Municipality Law, every ward should have one representative. But they don't dare to nominate a representative from their locality. They also have a firm belief that nobody would vote for them. Moreover, their identity hinders their participation in local elections. One of the most significant reasons for these humiliations and discrimination is their outcast identity.⁴⁰

5.2 Discussion

It is a fact that different types of stratification exist in other religions too. For instance: among Muslims, there exists a differentiation between *Ashraf* and *Atraaf* Muslims. But the nature of this inequality is quite different from the Hindu caste system. It is also assumed that caste discrimination is only prevalent in the Hindu religion. That's why *Dalits* face different forms of challenges, humiliation, and discrimination in the Hindu religion and India. Due to the lack of reservation in the job sector and politics, Bangladeshi *Dalits* are sometimes more complex than Indian ones. The incidence of caste-based violence in India is indeed more frequent. Besides, Bangladeshi *Dalits* suffer a lot due to their identity despite living in a Muslim-dominant country. In this way, caste

discrimination crosses its own religious boundary and becomes a social phenomenon. It is a ray of hope that nowadays many *Dalit* people are changing their traditional occupations for different reasons such as higher income, higher status, the hardship of the jobs, psychological dissatisfaction, etc. This changing pattern of employment certainly helps to alter their socioeconomic and financial position. This study also reflects that the political economy of the caste system may lead to the subordination of *Dalits* in South Asia.

6. How to Improve the Caste-based Discrimination against *Dalits*?

- i) The government of India and Bangladesh should ensure effective enforcement of existing legislation to protect *Dalits* from attacks, harassment, and discrimination.
- ii) Government and NGOs should take more initiative to ensure *Dalits* access to the same rights and services mainstream society enjoys.
- iii) To implement the Government's human rights obligations, NGOs should address the *Dalit* issue as a priority agenda by requesting a national study on discrimination on the grounds of caste, work, and descent.
- iv) The key national priorities to improve the situation of *Dalits* in India and Bangladesh⁴¹ and should be set in a comprehensive national action plan to eliminate caste, work, and descent-based discrimination. In this process, the GoB may decide to make use of a comprehensive UN framework to address caste discrimination.

7. Conclusion

The paper investigates how caste inequality surpasses its distinct religious boundary. Caste is a barrier to education and decent work, to inclusive economies, to the enjoyment of rights and representation, and therefore to sustainable development. Caste discrimination against *Dalits* is generally claimed to be a characteristic of the Hindu religion in both India and Bangladesh. But the present study has shown that *Dalit* people have to deal with a similar type of destiny in Muslim-dominated countries too. It indicates that the marginalization of *Dalits* has a religious basis, but it has crossed its own boundary and become a kind of social custom.

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