

The Socio-Economic Situation of the Cobbler Community (an Untouchable Class of Our Society) in Dhaka City: An Overview

Survey by

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Table of Content	Page No
Chapter 1	3
1.0 Historical Background	3
1.1 Settlement in Dhaka	3
1.2 The Social Context	3
1.3 The Economic Context	6
Chapter 2	7
2.0 The Objectives	7
Chapter 3	9
3.0 Sources of Data and Methodology	9
3.1 Sources of Data	9
3.2 The methodology	9
Chapter 4	10
4.0 Findings of Field Survey	10
4.1 Analysis of Field Situation	10
4.2 Analysis of Field level Data	11
Chapter 5	24
5.0 Conclusions and Recommendations	24
Chapter 6	
6.0 Case Study	25
Chapter 7	
7.0 Notes and References	26

Chapter 1

1.0 Historical Background

1.1 Settlement in Dhaka

Nobody exactly knows since when the cobbler community was settled in Dhaka city but it is widely believed that they were moved here during the period of Mughal Emperor Jahangir Shah (1605-1627). Lacking of proper historical data it is also believed that they were brought here by the then authority of the city as one of the 12 groups of service providers such as, *Jharuder*, *Muchi*, *Dhopa*, *Napit*, *Dome*, *Teli*, *Mali*, *Methor*, *Zola* etc. when Dhaka had been flourishing as the capital of Bengal under Mughal Empire. They might be settled in Dhaka that time but they were not the strangers here because this community is administered by *Panchayet* system, which is an age-old rural social institution of this country. However, after their settlement the cobbler community started to live in clusters in different parts of the Dhaka city like others. It also remains in darkness whether the clusters - where they have been living for generations - were provided by the city authority or they arranged it by their own efforts. There is no actual data in City Corporation or anywhere that how many clusters are there and what is the total population of them.

1.2 The Social Context

The cobbler community is widely known as '*Muchi*' throughout the country though they like to familiar themselves as '*Hrishi*'. They also live in clusters in the rural areas most of those are located in *Khas* land and are situated in the outside of the localities. The cluster is called as '*Muchipara*' administer under a village. In Dhaka, the cluster is also known as *Muchipara*. However, they are considered as 'untouchable' and thus a socially excluded class in the society and being discriminated by the society since their history. It is the main cause of their segregated living within the society.

The social history of Indian sub-continent projects caste system to identify the working position of the peoples in the society. We find its first mention in the *Veda* though most of the scholars said that it might be projected and added in later.¹ According to the *Veda*, the cast system was introduced aiming to distributing different types of activities among different qualities of people depending on their expertise. The aim of the division was to rein the society so that it could work in order. History recognizes that at the initial stage, the cast systems were not inherited. There was option to change it depending and regarding ones activities. The *Veda* also contains some examples of that. The cast system has ultimately been deformed and bloomed as division of classes among the society later on.

Evolution of power practice might be lagged behind it, which is also dominating the society. However, the cobbler community is one of the lowest castes among the caste system that determines their existence and fate in life. A fate that prescribes a life with no education, no paying jobs, frequent forced labor, no rights to own land or homes, no access to worship at the local temple, and completely segregated living to keep them far away from other upper caste peoples.²

In India, they are widely known as 'Dalit' or downtrodden who have been referred to in history, as people, without history of their own, which certainly is untrue and illogical, notwithstanding the fact that they have been a marginalized lot in their own land and treated as mere objects. Even scholars and academics have treated them as subjects for their research in social sciences, anthropology and philanthropy.³

On the contrary, some people of the upper class also thought for their upliftment. The great social reformer Swami Vivekananda urged the people of higher classes to give the rights of the downtrodden of the society.⁴ Perhaps it was the first sight to them before the freedom of India. After the freedom, some attempts were made by the newly borne Government of India to develop the social status of 'Dalits'. The father of the Indian nation, Mahatma Gandhi renamed them as 'Horijon' – the people of god and urged the upper caste peoples and the social leaders to uphold their rights.⁵ Several clauses were adopted in the Constitution of free India to remove the discriminatory attitude towards them (and also for everybody). Some attempts were made to highlight the issue, such as, Dr. Ambedkar, a member of untouchable class was appointed as the chief writer of the Constitution of free India. Though all these attempts could not bring any acceptable changes at grassroots level but perhaps, it would be able to bring some big personalities in the mainstream of the Indian power politics and administration from these classes. There are examples that the people of these communities hold the highest constitutional position of India. All these efforts have been helpful in organizing some peoples to speak for them. Now in India there are a number of organizations working for 'Dalits' aiming to achieve their rights and to provide them necessary support to reduce the discriminatory attitude against them. It is seen that over the past few years, a great desire for freedom has arisen among the low cast 'Dalits' in India. Now, they have come forward to demanding justice and freedom from cast slavery and persecution of it.

In Bangladesh, the situation is much hopeless than ever in India. No attempt has been made after partition in 1947 or liberation in 1972 either by the governments or by any quarter to uphold their rights. Perhaps, there is no example like India that the participation of this community in politics or administration is achieved. The media or the people in power could not show any interest to this target group. Even, it is more tragic that they

could not draw the attention of the mass people of the country. On the contrary, due to lacking of education, extreme poverty, etc. they could not be organized themselves to achieve their rights. As a result, they remain in backwardness of the society. They are also untouchable, downtrodden and remain out of all development efforts of the country.

There are two sects within the 'Muchi' community- Ruhidas and Haridas. Traditionally the Ruhidas produces new leather items while the Haridas are involved in repairing, coloring and polishing old shoes and other leather products. The Ruhidas take special pride in their creative jobs. Though they are the victims of class culture of the sub-continent they have created another class division among themselves as such, serious discriminations prevail between these two sects. Inter-marriage and other social interaction do not happen between them. Even they live separately within a cluster too.

Traditionally they belong Hindu religion. Recently, a portion of them has converted into Christianity by the missionaries and by some church based NGOs. They are being tempted by the commitment of better livelihood and religious freedom. However, it is urgent to read out the social history of the Indian sub-continent to understand the socio-economic status of this community along with other downtrodden classes properly because they (including cobbler community) have been living in all the parts of the subcontinents and serving the community since ancient times.

1.3 The Economic Context

The economic situation of this community is very miserable today in all over the country but in the rural areas they really live a very hardship life. There is no relevant data but it can be imagine that they never get any justified value of their service and as such they remain in poverty. Perhaps, the situation was quite better for those who came here in Dhaka when it had been flourishing in the 17th century and their service was considered essential because shoes were not produced by using modern machineries at that time and as such, everybody needed their help in wearing new shoes and in getting necessary lather goods.

There is no historical evidence that they were rewarded financially or socially. Thus, they remain poor with a good craftsmanship over the centuries. Though once they could earn their livelihood modestly from this occupation it has been very much difficult today due to the use of modern machineries for the production of shoes. They could not take the lead of the demand of the market with the population boom due to lack of capital. As they were lived in poverty since long before they were not able to purchase even small machineries to cope with the situation and as such they have been facing serious difficulties to earn their

livelihood. On the contrary, they did not try to change their profession to cope with the situation ever before.

Chapter 2

2.0 The Objectives of the Study

After liberation it was imperative for the nation to work for the socio-economic development of all religious and cultural communities of the country. But it is painful to note that nothing is done for these untouchable communities including the cobbler either by the government or by any non-government organization, whereas, thousands of NGOs are working for the socio-economic development of the people at grassroots level. To this context, SHAREE is working for this community. However, during the implementation of an action programme for this community it was seen that there is no ready-made information, which could be used as base line data for designing development programmes for them. It was the inception and the cause of the introduction of this study. It should be mentioned here that a lot of research works have been done for '*Dalits*' in India⁶ but in Bangladesh they remained out of sight by the government, professionals and development practitioner as well.

This study has focused on the socio-economic profile of the cobbler community of the Dhaka city and tried to identify the discrimination they faced regularly from the historical perspective. The aim of this study was also to identify the dimension of problems faced by the community today and to develop a data-base for the development practitioners so that it could be helpful in designing development programmes and could urged in-depth studies in future. In more concrete terms the study has focused on the following:

- i. To identify the socio-economic profile of the cobbler community of Dhaka city;
- ii. To identify the nature and dimension of the problems of the community to carry on their aged old profession and
- iii. To find out the right ways of solving their problems.

Chapter 3

3.0 Sources of Data and Methodology

3.1 Sources of Data

The study was done mainly based on primary level information. Secondary level data have been used but there is a great lack of it. No mentionable data have been produced on this community live in Bangladesh earlier by any quarter.

3.2 The Methodology

For primary level data, a sample survey was carried out in 4 out of 26 clusters located in Dhaka city. A pre-structured questionnaire was used for the survey.

A total of 144 households were surveyed in March 2003-September 2003. Due to limitations of time and necessary resources a purposive random sampling method has been followed equally taken the same number of sample from each area.

On the other hand, the questionnaire was developed for generating data for preparing a project proposal giving emphasis on health issues not for an in-depth socio-economic study. It is the major limitation of the study.

Chapter 4

4.0 Findings of the Survey

4.1 Analysis of Field Situation

It is found that the cobbler community lives in 26 clusters or 'Paras' in Dhaka city. Some clusters are so big that they have comprised up to 9000 population. Gopibagh 'Muchi Para' is such a cluster. On the other hand, there is no actual statistics on this community but it is estimated during the survey that the total population of cobbler community in Dhaka city is around 1 lakh, which is 1% of the total population of the metropolitan city.

The cobbler community has no social respect and they have been neglected over generations. They like to live in clusters and don't like to leave it because of mental retardness. As they do not get social respect they always feel shy and keep alien themselves from others. It demoralizes them and undermines their entrepreneurship.

They live in small houses. Sometimes it is seen that a ten member family is living in a 120sft small room. On the contrary, people do not want to rent out their house to them. As a result, they can not live in a better place if they can afford.

During the investigation it is found that the main factor of their backwardness in education is the social disintegration of the community. Generally, children of this community are not welcomed in public schools. Children of other communities do not want to mix with them if they admitted in schools. It was also seen that they had no access in the schools and other social institutions quite before. Everybody avoids them. However, the situation has been softening day by day. Today there is no direct constraint to have enrollment of their children in the schools and colleges but a mental barrier still remains. As the people of other communities do not want to mix with their children they lose their good intention to get education in public schools and colleges. In addition, poverty, of course, is a major obstacle to have education to this community. However, the situation is changing

positively and they are sending their children to the school at a higher rate of enrolment though it is still very poor.

During the investigation it was found that economic situation of the community is very weak. They had been living in poverty since their history. They never showed any interest to overcome their economic deprivation. Perhaps, social negligence has been undermining their mental strength and restricting to take initiative to reduce poverty, which has been more acute today due to the free market economy and use of modern technology in producing shoe making business today.

During the investigation it was also found that this threat of livelihood could be reduced if they can use some handy equipments and tools for quality production of shoes and leather based handicraft items at household level. In addition, they need capital support to make their business enterprise competitive and profitable. Now they lend money to run their business from money- lender at high rate of interest, which takes major part of the profit.

4.2 Analysis of field level data

There is no doubt that the cobbler community of Bangladesh is poverty ridden and down trodden in the society. The findings of the study support it. According to the Table 1, the monthly income of the 71% respondent families is below TK.3000 only for an average family size of 5.1 (Table 2). It might be considered a very small amount to maintain such a family smoothly in the capital city. Among the rest, 15% families earn between TK.3001-4000, 9% between TK. 4001-5000 and only 6% families earn TK. 5000 + per month.

Instead of their acute poverty, the respondents have no alternative to get rid it off as they have no education or any skills to diversify their occupation. The study found low literacy rate among the respondents. Table 3 reveals that 30% respondents are literate, which is much lower than national average (65%). Of which, 15% have primary level education, 12% secondary level and only 3% have vocational training. Higher education is totally absent among the community. However, it influences the occupational pattern of the respondents too.

Table 1: Level of income of the respondents

Level	No	%
2000 (up to)	25	17.36
2001-3000	77	53.47
3001-4000	21	14.58
4001-5000	13	9.03
5000+	8	5.56

Total	144	100.00
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Source: Field Survey, 2003

1] **Table 2: Socio-economic profiles of the respondents**

Profile	NO/%
Average family size (No)	5.10
Average earning member (No)	1.4
Rate of education of the respondents (%)	29.86
Suffer from fever within last 12 months (%)	60.82

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 3: Level of education of the respondents

Level	No	%
Illiterate	101	70.14
I-V	21	14.58
VI-X	15	10.42
SSC+	2	1.39
Vocational training	5	3.47
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 4 shows a hopeless figure of their occupation. Nobody of the respondent families is serving any job in any formal sector. According to it, 41% respondents are doing odd jobs out of their ancestral occupation, of them, 9% are petty traders, 8% are involved in various types of handicraft works, 7% are salesman and 6% are working as day labourer. The rest depends on other trades. Thus, their aged old occupation is at stake today. It is mainly because they could not cope with the modern technology, which produces fashionable shoes. Besides, they have no ability to purchase the handy machineries, which could help them to produce quality products. However, the study reveals that only 59% people are involved in their paternal profession.

Instead of low level of education they are not showing much interest to the education of their children today. Table 5 shows a poor (38%) enrollment of the school going children of this community. It reflects that enrollment rate among the boys is 51%, which is much lower (21%) among girl children.

Table4: Occupation of the respondents

Occupation	No	%
Repairing/polishing of shoes	85	59.03
Petty trade/hawker	13	9.03

Handicraft	12	8.33
Job in informal sector/ Salesman	10	6.94
Day labour	8	5.56
Dependent on others	7	4.86
House wife	6	4.17
Others	3	2.08
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 5: Enrollment of children (5-15) in school

	No. of school going children	No. of enrollment	% of enrollment
Boys	73	40	54.79
Girls	70	15	21.43
Total	143	55	38.46

Source: Field Survey, 2003

The size of land won by the respond families was not asked in the survey but it can be easily assumed that which size they belong is not mentioned worthy. However, 70% respondents (Table 6) live in their own houses. Another 5% live in own houses but built on other's land. A significant portion (24%) of the respondent families lives in rented houses. During the investigation it is found that they rent in houses within their community.

As the target group lives in the urban area majority of the respondents have access to urban utility services, such as supplied water, electricity, etc. Table 7 reveals that 76% respondent families have access to piped water. The rest 22% use tube wells. On the other hand, 92% (Table 8) respondent families have access to electricity. Besides, 90% (Table 9) have sanitary latrine facilities and 4% uses slab latrine. Only 6% uses *Kutchra* latrine, which is the cause of health hazards.

Table 6: Ownership of housing of respondent families

Ownership pattern	No	%
Owner	101	70.14
Rented	34	23.61
Own house but built on other's land	7	4.86
Others	2	1.39
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 7: Source of drinking water

Source	No	%
Tube well	32	22.22
Piped water	110	76.39
Others	2	1.39
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 8: Access to electricity

Response	No	%
Yes	132	91.67
No	12	8.33
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 9: Type of latrine used by respondents families

Type	No	%
Sanitary	129	89.59
<i>Kucha</i>	9	6.25
Ring slab	3	2.08
Others	3	2.08
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

The correlation between the economic activities and the loan pattern identify a downward trend of their economic status. Their occupation pattern (Table 4) shows that 17% respondents are involved in self-help economic activities, which may need credit support, whereas, 34% respondents (Table 10) received loan during last year. It means that they are taking loan to meet up their daily family expenses. Table 11 supports that among the loan receivers 47% are taking loan to meet up the extra expenditure of their families, such as, treatment, marriage and other purposes.

According to Table 12, it is seen that average size of loan per respondent is TK.8803. They received it from different sources, such as, NGOs, Banks, relatives, moneylenders, cooperatives and others. The major source is NGOs. Among the loan receivers, 71% received it from NGOs. These figures are 10%, 8%, 4%, 2% and 4% for Banks, relatives, moneylenders, cooperatives and other sources respectively. Table 13 reveals that 46 out of 144 respondents had savings only, which is 32% of the total. The average size of the savings is TK.2688 and the NGO held the highest place of their trust in savings.

Table 10: Loan taken by respondents

Response	No	%
Yes	49	34.03
No	95	65.97
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 11: Reasons of receiving loan

Reasons	No	%
Petty trade	37	75.51
Treatment	6	12.24
Marital purpose	2	4.08
Land purchase	1	2.04
Others	3	6.12
Total	49	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 12: Source and size of loan taken by respondents

Sources	No	%	Amount	%
NGO	35	71.43	244100	56.59
Bank	5	10.20	88500	20.52
Relative	4	8.16	52500	12.17
Money lender	2	4.08	11000	2.55
Cooperative	1	2.04	10000	2.32
Others	2	4.08	25250	5.85
Total	49	100.00	431350	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 13: Place and size of savings of the respondents

Place of saving	No	%	Amount	%
NGO	35	76.09	43720	35.36
Bank	8	17.39	57840	46.78
Cooperative	2	4.35	2080	1.68
Relative	1	2.17	20000	16.18
Total	46	100.00	123640	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

According to Table 14, it is seen that the members of the respondent families were suffered from different diseases, such as, fever, (influenza), diarrhea, gastric ulcer, malnutrition, etc.

which are inter-linked with living in harsh and unhygienic condition and extreme poverty as well. The survey also reveals the high rate of incidence of diseases among the community. A total of 735 incidences of diseases were reported for a total population of 740 in the last year following the survey. On the contrary, major portion (61%) of respondents went to quack or health worker for treatment purpose during illness (Table 15). Among the rest, 10% and 6% go to MBBS doctors and NGO health centres for the same purpose respectively and 17% purchase medicine from the nearby medicine corners without doctor's advice. And 4% of the respondents do not take any measure during their illness.

In reply to a question regarding economic difficulties faced by the respondent families in procuring medical treatment in the last year, 101 respondents out of 144 (Table 15) replied positively to this question in the area of receiving advice from doctors. The number is 96 for purchasing medicines, 20 for conducting necessary pathological examinations and 5 for necessary sick diet.

Table 14: Incidence of fever in last year

Name of fever	Number	% of total family members
Fever/influenza	270	36.73
Diarrhea	204	27.76
Gastric/Ulcer	154	20.95
Malnutrition	152	20.68
ENT	36	4.90
Skin disease	26	3.54
Pneumonia	10	1.36
Others	16	2.18
Total	N=735	

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 15: To whom you go during the illness?

Source	Number	Per-cent
Quack/Village health worker	121	61.13
Purchase medicine without doctor's advice	34	17.17
MBBS	19	9.56
NGO health center	11	5.56
Do not take treatment	7	3.54
Others	6	3.04
Total	198	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table16: Ability to procure proper treatment for family members with in last 12 months?

	No	Per cent
Receiving advice from doctor	101	43
Purchase of medicine	96	48
Conducting necessary pathological examination	-	144
Purchase of necessary sick-diet	5	139

Source: Field Survey, 2003

The respondents were asked to different aspect of health care aiming to judge their level of consciousness. However, the overall findings do not show any hopeful sign. According to table 17, the awareness of the 37% respondents was rights. They said first breast milk should be given to the children after birth, while 30% give their opinion for honey and 11% for water mixed with sugar and 22% respondents replied negatively that they do not know what to do. But the findings of the Table 18 do not match the relation between knowledge and action of the respondents. According to Table 18, only 17% respondents gave shawl milk as first food to their children after birth whereas, 37% respondents favored it by giving their opinion. It also reveals that 42% respondents gave honey as first food to their newly born babies, which is quite higher than their opinion given in Table 17. However, the reasons of not giving shawl milk to the newly born babies were injurious to health (Table 19). According to it, 54% respondents thought so.

Table17: Response on first food given to children after birth

Food	No	%
First breast (Shawl) milk	53	36.81
Honey	43	29.86
Do not know	32	22.22
Water mixed with sugar	16	11.11
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table18: First food given after birth by respondents

Food	No	%
Honey	61	42.36
Water mixed with sugar	29	20.14
Do not know	29	20.14
Shawl milk	25	17.36
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table19: Reason of not giving Shawl milk to newly born babies

Reason	No	%
Injurious to health	78	54.17
Do not know	28	19.45
Prohibited by everybody	9	6.25
Cause of stomach pain	3	2.08
No response	26	18.05
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 20 reveals that only 26% respondents have proper knowledge on duration of breast-feeding. Table 21 shows only 20% respondents are aware of the time to supplying additional food. Most of the respondents have no idea about the malnutrition of their children though it is totally an issue of professional nutritionist/doctors. However, in reply to such an enquiry 28% (Table 22) respondents gave their opinion positively. According to them, 25% and 3% children are malnourished and nourished respectively. The rest (72%) have no idea about it.

Table20: Awareness on duration of breast- feeding

Response	No	%
Yes	38	26.39
No	106	73.61
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 21: Awareness on supplying additional food

Response	No	%
Yes	29	20.14
No	115	79.86
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table22: Knowledge on nutritional status of children

Response	No	%
Do not know	104	72.22
Malnourished	36	25.00
Nourished	4	2.78
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

The study also shed light on the measures taken to protect their children by giving medicine of worm to their children, vaccination, feeding of Vitamin A capsule, etc. in time. It has investigated whether they know the blood group of their children or they are aware of danger of AIDS/STDs.

Table 23 reveals that only 19% respondents feed medicine of worm to their children within last 12 months, which is not a hopeful figure. An unbelievable fact also remains in the case of Polio vaccination. Only 55% children of the respondent families are vaccinated (Table 24). It should be checked again during the further studies because according to our national statistics this figure should be 100%. The rate of feeding Vitamin A capsule to the children is 41% (Table 25). On the other hand, majority of the respondents do not know the blood group of their children. During a discussion it is found that they do not feel the need of knowing it. Only 6% (Table 26) respondents replied positively. Besides, the respondents are adequately aware of the threat of HIV/AIDS. Table 27 reflects that 82% respondents are familiar with the threat of it.

The study was not inclined to look after the empowerment issue of women of the community. It puts a glimpse of view indeed. Table 28 shows that issue of empowerment is still neglected in the community. The opinion of women is not honored at any level properly. Male members take the major decisions in the family. Table 28 shows that decisions on education and marriage of the children of the respondent families are being taken by husbands. Fifty four per cent respondents support it. Joint decisions were taken in 23% cases. The decision of practicing family planning is mainly taken by husband and wife jointly (46%). On the other hand, husbands are taking decisions mainly in participating NGO activities (43%). The corresponding figure is only 12%. However, 34% respondents take the decision jointly.

Table 23: Responses to giving medicine of worm to the children within last 12 months?

Response	Number	%
Yes	28	19.44
No	116	80.56
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 24: Responses to feeding Polio Vaccine to the children?

Response	Number	%
Yes	79	54.86
No	65	45.14
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 25: Did you feed Vitamin A capsule to your children

Response	Number	%
Yes	59	40.97
No	85	59.03
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 26: Do you know your blood group?

Response	Number	%
Yes	9	6.25
No	135	93.75
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 27: Do you know about AIDS?

Response	Number	%
Yes	121	84.03
No	23	15.97
Total	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Table 28: Who takes the decisions in the following?

	Education of children		Marriage of children		Accepting of family planning		Participating in NGO activities	
	No	%	No	%	No	%	No	%
Husband	78	54.17	78	54.16	29	20.14	62	43.06
Husband & wife jointly	33	22.92	33	22.92	66	45.83	49	34.03
Wife	4	2.78	-	-	37	25.69	17	11.80
Others	29	20.13	33	22.92	12	8.34	16	11.11
Total	144	100.00	144	100.00	144	100.00	144	100.00

Source: Field Survey, 2003

Chapter 5

5. Conclusions and Recommendations

The Constitution of Bangladesh acknowledges the human rights and fundamental rights of its citizen. The Government of Bangladesh has taken the responsibility to ensure it for all but it is yet to be achieved to this community. Bangladesh government have extra

obligation as it has ratified the major Conventions on human rights and fundamental rights taken by the United Nations.

On the other hand, the UN is working for the socio-economic development of backward sections especially for the indigenous people. To make the world communities conscious about their rights it commemorated International Year of the World Indigenous People in 1993 and International Decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004). But it is unfortunate that it did not give such attention to these types of communities who are not indigenous (according to the definition given by the UN) but discriminated and neglected by the society for thousand of years.

The Government of Bangladesh has not taken any specific programme to the socio-economic development of this community or to reduce their sufferings.⁷ The NGOs working in the country ever since the independent of the country unfortunately have overlooked the sufferings of the community.

To the given context, it is urgent to take various development programmes targeting to the cobbler community in Bangladesh. It is urgent to raise the enrollment of the children of this community to school for achieving the goal of education for all by 2015. Extended primary health care support, sanitation, housing facilities is needed for their upliftment.

In addition, they need to be provided with skills training on their ancestral profession and financial support so that they can use handy machineries to cope with the free market economy and can earn their livelihood properly.

Diversification of occupation of this community is also a felt need because it would not be a realistic approach to compete shoe companies longer more, who use modern machineries for the purpose. Rather, they can diversify their expertise to leather-made handicraft goods, which have demand all over the time. To do this they need skills development training and support for marketing the products.

Above all, they need to change the discriminatory attitude and the negligence of the society, which is the most urgent to achieve their socio-economic empowerment.

Chapter 6

6.1 Case Study-1

Septuagenarian Bhagabati Rani opposes child marriage

Bhagabati Rani got married when she was only twelve. Her husband Ram Mohon Das was 16 at that time. Only one year after her marriage she gave birth to a baby boy. She had to tend to her child when she was a child herself. She had to take the big responsibility of raising a child when she had to take assistance from the elders for living a life. Even her

husband Ram Mohon was indifferent to his responsibility as the father of a child. “I gave birth to a child and learned to live with the responsibility before I had any idea about raising a child. Now at this old age I realize that marrying off under-aged girls or getting married at an early age are not the right things to do. NGOs should work to stop child marriage beside the government,” she said. Now 76 of age Bhagabati lives at Jhigatola in Dhaka.

By profession Bhagabati belongs to the barber community. Previously her children used to mend tattered shoes but now they make new ones. She gave an account of her life and different problems and benefits of the profession and problems faced by the people of her community. People have to face more problems and have less benefit in this community. They are almost socially oppressed. If they are not brought to the mainstream there will be a time when the existence of this community will be wiped out from the society. There will be no options left for them other than depending on others for living. Social discriminations eat into them. They cannot mix with the mainstream society or live with them or take part in social events in this age of globalization. To end their state of neglect they will have to be brought to the mainstream society. While carrying out a survey regarding their assimilation in the mainstream society Non-government voluntary organization Sharee finds out the state of women’s right in the community. Bhagabati Das said that people of her community is neglected in the society even if they are educated. They do not get any job. When they apply for a job they are weighed up differently for their traditional background and are denied a job. In the end they have to mend old shoes sitting at home even if they are educated. Bhagabati Das is a mother of 5 sons and 4 daughters. According to her belief her 9 children are god-sent. She has nothing to do in it. No human being can do anything about it. But she thinks that this problem should be solved in the current perspective. She said that her mother and grandmothers also got married at an early age when they were in their childhood. They do not want their daughters to become burdens in the family when they grow up. That’s why child marriage is rife in the community. Her grandson also got married in his childhood though a case is going on at the court regarding the matter. The community has a high maternal mortality rate due the custom of child marriage. She said that many people claim that they are from a lowly background which is not true. They belong to this community due to their profession. And for this reason they live at the same place instead of living at different places. The picture of their health consciousness is very frustrating. Many people are dying from different diseases for lack of proper hygiene and health sense. Till now they believe that exorcism is the only healer of diseases. Especially expecting mothers are never taken

to the hospital. Midwives take charge during childbirth at home. For this many infants are born with disabilities or are prone to diseases.

There is no sign of empowerment of women in this community. Women have to abide by the men of the society. This custom is still on in the barber community. Never ever a woman has the guts to talk out a man. Most of the men of the community remain intoxicated most of the time. Often they torture their women when they are drunk. This kind of situation is quite rampant. They are indifferent about political state of affairs because they think they do not have any representative due to their low rank in the society. For this they do not take part in polls. They have a negative opinion about equal rights of men and women in the community. They do not believe that men and women should have equal rights in the society. They think that women should be engaged in household works and raising children. They should not take part in any kind of decision making process. Women do not have a say even during the marriage of their children. Whatever decision is taken by men the women have to abide by that.

Replying to a question Bhagabati Das said that their acceptance is very low in different service providing organizations. If the organization comes to know that they belong to the barber community it remains indifferent about their work. Especially in the departments of postal service, police stations, Desa, Wasa, BTTB and ward commissioners' office. Besides, when they go to the temple to worship the priests do not give them preference branding them as untouchables. They have to take seat in a lowly place. No body wants to rent out houses to them. As a result they are still living as an untouchable community of this society which is very unfortunate in this age of globalization.

When people of the world are assimilating with each other and are trying to create an atmosphere of universal brotherhood denying social hierarchy the barber community is living in a different world. They are not getting any special attention from the society for living in a state of neglect. They are being evaluated as the untouchables of the society.

6.2 Case Study-2

Smriti Rani fights child marriage

“Getting married means going into a married life. And then I will have to give birth to a child every year and be tortured by the husband. He will beat me up if I do not abide by him. I don't want this kind of marriage,” said 16-year old Smriti Rani Das with eyes brimming with tears.

Smriti is the daughter of Brajendra Chandra Das. She has passed the age of going to school. She has a strong desire to do studies but her parents are trying to get her married. They have already started looking. But Smriti does not want to get married. She wants to

do a job after completing her studies. Then she want to get married with a good person. Smriti lives in the barber quarters of Jhikatola in Dhaka. She belongs to the barber community. That's why she is unable to go to school. Other students of the school and even the teachers look down on her. They weigh her up from a different point of view for her low rank in the society. For this reason she does not want to go to school. In spite of that she studied up to class five. But when she was taking preparation to go to the high school she had to stop her studies because her parents want to marry her off. She knows that child marriage is forbidden in the society but she cannot ignore the decision of her parents. She said that they are weighed up differently while getting admitted to schools and colleges. A few eyebrows are raised when they write about their profession in the admission form. Social elites brand them as the untouchables. A separate school is needed for them. But there is no scope for that in the existing laws of the country. As a result they have almost stopped going to the school. Smriti is not alone. Thousands of girls in the barber community are facing the same fate. They do not believe in caste or social hierarchy in this age of globalization. They also want the social freedom to live with others in the society. They want to study. They want to do jobs. They want to get married and live with social recognition. To give them this opportunity and to bring them to the mainstream all the people in the society will have to come forward and forget the discrimination rendered by caste and religion.

6.3 Case Study-3

Women of the Harijan community have started to become conscious of their rights

Madhubala lives in Nagar Beltoli in the old part of Dhaka city. Though she is 60 years of age she looks more than her actual age. Her husband is Mohon Das. He works in his ancestral shop of shoes. He has to meet the household expenses with his meager income. Madhubala got married only at the age of 13 because her parents were not ready to take the burden of a grown up anymore. Girls are of no use so they are sent to others' places as soon as possible. Others' place means the house of the husband, she said. Asked why it is other's place Madhubala said that husband's house is not the house of her own. Her father's house is her own. Madhubala's mother also got married at an early age of 11. She said that early marriage is a tradition of their family. She has four daughters and one son. Three daughters were married off before they were fifteen. The youngest one is 12. They are looking for a groom for her. Though it is known that maternal and child mortality rate is high in the community due to child marriage the practice is rampant due to social insecurity, poverty, lack of education and lack of awareness.

Madhubala said that they belong to the lower caste of the society. Social elites take them as untouchables. Especially the Brahmins do not want them to get into their houses. This problem is still prevalent in the society. Their forefathers could not go to a Brahmin's house. Even if they went there once the Brahmins used to anoint the house with cow dung after they left. Due to these reasons they could not mix with others in the society. Consequently they started living together with their own community. The percentage of educated people is very low among them. Till now they are denied access to the schools and colleges according to the past laws. Other students do not want to sit with them in one class. Therefore very few of them go to the school. Most of them are clinging to the profession of their forefathers. There is no one in the society who will listen to them. There is no place in the society where they can place their demands. So they are living on their own. The rate of repression of women is very high in their society. The most distressing thing is that when a girl becomes pregnant she is sent back to her father's place to bring dowry. She is told not to come back if she fails to bring dowry. This practice is rife in the barber community. In the age of globalization they want to mix with other people in the society and get rid of these problems. They think that if they socialize with others then they will be able to heal these social wounds on their own. But they are unable to do that because of the resistance from social elites. They should be brought to the mainstream society. For this people from all walks of life will have to stand against the unjust social discrimination represented by the elites.

6.4 Case Study-4

Sita Rani does not want to stay away from her husband anymore

"If I could get my husband back through your writings then my broken family would have breathed life again," Sita Rani broke into tears while saying these words with her only son Raja sitting beside her. Sita lives in the Gonoktuli Sweeper Colony of Dhaka. Soon after her marriage her husband left her for another woman.

Only 28 years of age Sita got married at an early age of 14. Even though she did not know anything about a married life she had to get married due to the pressure from her parents. Her father Ramesh Das got her married with Mahendra Das of the same colony. Right after the marriage she was leading a nice married life with her husband. After a year she gave birth to a baby boy too. But after a few days her husband got married again without citing any specific reason. Nobody can say why he did this. He got married with Fulkumari of Munsiganj and went there leaving his first wife and son. He does not keep in touch with Sita Rani anymore. Finding no other place to go Sita went to her brother's place. Her brother Badal Das could not leave her alone. But it becomes difficult to meet the expenses of his own family and his sister's with his meager income. When Sharee's woker Farzana

Aktar Mukta approached Sita she informs Mukta in tearful eyes that her husband does not bear any costs of her. Mukta approached Sita while working in the sweeper development activities of non-governmental organization Sharee. Once the Panchayet of the colony discussed the matter but later it was postponed due to unknown reasons. Sita does not want to stay at her brother's place anymore.

The sweeper community has a Panchayet system to discuss and look after all kinds of legal and social matters. There are 5 heads but all of them are male. There are no women members. Therefore women have no say in the Panchayet. When Panchayet sits to discuss matters they never talk about matters concerning women. That's why women like Sita Rani do not get justice. Her son Raja studies in class five. He does not want to grow up with the identity of his father. He wants to change the patriarchal society. He wants to see the mothers in the lead which was not possible in the sweeper colony. Non-governmental organization Sharee has built up an awareness campaign in the area to eliminate discrimination and ensure presence of women in the Panchayet. Schools are being opened for dropped out children of the colony. A fraternity for young adults is being organized. They are being trained so that they do not have to live on their traditional jobs only. The government will also have to take steps to bring them to the mainstream society. We do not want any Sita Rani to be away from her husband.

7. Notes and References

Notes

¹ Ganguly, P. 341

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⁴ Bibekananda

⁵ Gandhi

⁶ Encyclopedia of Dalit in India

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Cobblers Living in Uncertainty

By Priya Saha

NOBODY exactly knows since when the cobbler community, known as the *muchis*, has settled in Dhaka. It is widely believed that this community has lived here since the period of the Moghul emperor Jahangir Shah. There is no data available about the number of *muchi* population in the city.

In the city's Jigatola area, about 60 families comprising 500 family members, live together at a place called Rishi-Muchipara over an area of 1.5 acres of land. The community has lived here for generations. Each family has inherited some land and for generations they have shared it with descendants. The sharing has resulted in the size of the plots shrinking and now, some dwellings are so crammed that half a dozen members have to share a single room.

Bholanath, about 70, one of the elderly members of Rishi-Muchipara said that they had lived in the same place for as many as 11 generations. He said that his forefathers came during the Moghul period for providing services to the people and the landlords. He did not know where they came from but insisted that the *muchi* community came to this part of the world as one of the 12 groups of service providers such as *dhopa*, *napit*, *dome*, *telli*, *mali*, *mehtar* and *zola*. Each of these communities has always lived in clusters in different parts of the country, and did specialised works, otherwise rejected by the local population.

The *muchis* are mainly involved in producing leather goods such as shoes, bags, purses and belts. Some of the members are good craftsmen and produce various essential household items from bamboo & cane.

Ratan Das, an elected Panchayat leader of Rishi-Muchipara, said that he is the General Secretary of the Panchayets and his job involves solving day-to-day social problems of the com-



Even a few years ago *muchis* were seen in almost every part of the city, but the number of the *muchis* is decreasing day by day.

munity. Das proudly claimed that within their community, crime rate is almost nonexistent because the Panchayat has a firm control over the community. He is so powerful that he can ask all members of the community to boycott an individual or a family. Whenever such a sentence is bestowed the members of different other communities are also informed. Usually all *muchi* communities are respectful to the Panchayat's decision and there is hardly any violation.

There are two sects within the *muchi* community, *Ruhidas* and *Haridas*. The *Ruhidas* produces new leather items while the *Haridas* are involved in repairing, colouring and polishing old shoes and leather products. The *Ruhidas* take special pride in their job and intermarriage between these two sects or any other social interactions do not happen. The sects live separately.

There are 26 *paras* or villages in the city. Some *paras* are so big that they have up to 9,000 members. For instance in the city's Gopibagh area, the *muchipara* has about 9,000 members. All the *paras* resemble one another. The members are hard working but poverty has gripped them severely.

In a survey recently conducted by SHAREE, a self-help association for rural people through education and entrepreneurship, it was found that most of the *muchis* do not know how to

write or read. None of the national or informal educational programs has reached this community living in the city for generations.

Women in the *muchi* community are the most deprived ones. Childhood marriages are very common in the community. They are burdened with household works as well as helping their husbands. Many women feel that despite their hard work they could not shrug off poverty. They said the entire family is working without much return for their hard

labour. Technology is yet to reach the community. The government should help them to adopt modern technologies to produce more and earn more. Currently many members of the *muchi* community are giving up their traditional job and joining other sectors.

New groups of people from the mainstream population are also joining the trade with better technologies, having much better marketing facilities. The original *muchis* cannot compete with this new breed of intruders.

There are also interesting features in the community. For instance, after death of cattle, a *muchi* collects the skin. During the process of removing the skin from the dead animal, if anyone is able to witness the de-skinning, he gets the proportionate share of the profit. The *muchis* have their own culture of marital system and other social activities, mostly similar to Hindu community.

In Jigatola the community's access to healthcare is similar to slum people. Ramanondo Das said that although they are permanent residents of the city, the government considers them as floating slum dwellers. No one is coming forward to help them. They remain far behind from the mainstream development programmes. The *muchis* are indeed, a neglected community concerned about their future.

Priya Saha is a social worker.