

DALIT CHILDREN STRUGGLE TO ACCESS BASIC RIGHTS IN BANGLADESH

RIISING WATERS AND DISCRIMINATION ARE SEVERELY LIMITING LIFE CHANCES OF YOUNG DALIT GIRLS IN KHULNA DISTRICT OF BANGLADESH

Margaret Kernan in conversation with Swapon Kumar Das, Dalit NGO

The Sundarbans, the world's largest mangrove forest spanning nearly 4,000 square miles on both sides of the Bangladeshi Indian border, have provided a natural barrier against tides and cyclones. However, due to illegal cutting down of trees and climate change-induced rising water levels [the forest is shrinking](#). This has spelt disaster for the millions of people living in this coastal delta region. Deteriorating crop-growing conditions, lack of fresh water, an increase in water-borne diseases and regular destruction of homes and schools are just some of the problems encountered there. The situation is particularly devastating for the estimated 3.9 million Dalits[i] living in the southwest part of Bangladesh. They have great difficulty accessing basic social supports because of poverty, caste, and gender discrimination and are sometimes excluded from government cyclone shelters.



Dalits, referred to as 'the untouchables' or 'outcasts' are the lowest caste in the Hindu caste system[ii]. A typical girl or boy born into a Dalit family can expect a life of exclusion, food insecurity, early school drop-out and menial and hazardous work. Although Bangladesh has been successful in reducing its national poverty rate from over half of the population to less than a third over the past two decades, the oppressed position of Dalits has hardly shifted in this time. This affects their education chances (the literacy rates of Dalits, estimated to be 40-42 percent, is far below the national average of 75 percent) as well as access to shelter and food especially during climate induced disasters.



Swapon Kumar Das, a founding member of Dalit NGO established in 1998 has made it his life's work to improve access to education and health care for Dalit children in Bangladesh. As a very small boy growing up in a rural Dalit village in the subdistrict Paikgacha of Khulna, Swapon, along with two other boys from the village pleaded with their parents that they, just like the children from other castes, be allowed to go to school. Early experiences at primary school included having to sit apart from other children because they were untouchables and having his date of birth estimated by his first teacher. This was because his own parents were illiterate and birth registration of Dalit children was not common. His and his friends' later attempt to establish a community school for other Dalit children in their village was immediately rejected by the local leader and member of a higher caste, who questioned why Dalit children need to be educated. Driven by a mixture of sadness and anger they persevered and decided to build their own school. 'We went into the bamboo forest and stole 50 bamboos and with the help of other 'brothers' we built our own school'.

This early enterprise developed into an NGO called Dalit. The vision of Dalit NGO is 'A world in which Dalit and other marginalised communities realise their full potential in caste-based free societies that respect people's rights and dignity'. A hallmark of Dalit NGO, which in 2023 celebrated its 25-year anniversary, is to consistently claim the rights and dignity of Dalits living in Bangladesh. Currently, Dalit NGO work in five districts in Khulna reaching 45,000 families in 300 villages. Most of the villages where they work are affected by both slow onset disasters such as water logging, salination, drought and coastal erosion, and rapid onset disasters such as flash floods, cyclones and tidal surges.



A major focus of Dalit NGO's work has been to support families to enrol their children in government run schools and at the same time to be better prepared for climate disasters. Given their stressed living conditions, convincing Dalit parents that it is worthwhile educating their children, especially their daughters, is a major challenge.



Swapon describes what life is like for a Dalit family living in a coastal village in 2023. 'Most of the families are still living in mud and bamboo houses with roofs made from palm leaves. Some families can buy tin to make stronger roofs. When the flash floods come, they must leave their homes behind and move to higher ground on the roadside and stay in makeshift houses or tents there'. Often, all a family's possessions including the children's schoolbooks and materials, which have been bought with help from Dalit NGO, are lost in these floods. The floods and cyclones are more severe and are occurring at times of the year when it is not expected. Many are forced to migrate to cities for which they are not at all prepared for. Neither do they receive government support when they get there. Swapon explains, 'These climate migrants are completely excluded from the government Social Safety Net Programme because they are not permanent residents of cities'. Unlike non-Dalits migrating to cities, Dalits – because of their caste status – are also excluded from the city slums and have no political representation or social support'.



The severity of the flooding and the destruction of the natural barrier that the Sundarbans provided is increasing water salinity. This means that fresh drinking water is harder to find, and sanitation conditions are very poor. Swapon, who is a qualified health professional, mentions that water borne diseases such as dysentery and diarrhoea, problems with liver function and skin diseases are common. Pregnant Dalit women, babies and people with disabilities are particularly vulnerable.

National and local Government preparedness for cyclones has improved following the widespread destruction and large death toll of Cyclones Sidr in 2007 and Aila in 2009. There are now better weather warning systems and hundreds more cyclone shelters have been built. Dalit NGO staff try to mitigate the negative impact of climate change by educating the villagers about how to prepare for floods. Advice includes gathering important documents; putting together emergency supply of food and clothing. They also ensure that local government warning messages about cyclones are heard and understood. This way Dalit families can move to safer higher ground in time. Another important part of Dalit NGOs work is advocacy and campaign work with local government to ensure that Dalits can access the cyclone shelters when it is necessary to do so. Shockingly Dalits have been excluded from the cyclone shelters,

especially when they become overcrowded. Sometimes they have also been forced to use the shelters meant for domestic animals, which puts them off seeking shelter in the first place. As Swapon says,

‘Our message to local government is clear - Dalits are human beings and they also have the right to go to a government shelter and survive’.

Another negative impact of the climate crisis on Dalit children, particularly young adolescent girls, is that they are more likely to be forced to marry. There is strong evidence from international agencies such as [UNFPA that climate change and related environmental crises are exacerbating the drivers of child marriage](#) such as prioritising boys’ education over girls and families taking children out of school because they can’t cover the costs of school fees, books and materials. Whilst there was some hope that the Dutch government-funded programme, [Her Choice](#) had contributed to reducing rates of child marriage in Jashore district where Dalit NGO also work (ICDI and Dalit NGO were participating organisations in Her Choice), Swapon sees that the rates of child marriage are once again creeping up. This is because of the loss of income to families, disruption of schooling during climate disasters and during [Covid 19 pandemic](#) and more migration to cities.

We end our discussion, which took place in the last days of December 2023 searching for signs of hope for the new year. With some reservation, Swapon reports that their advocacy work with local government and local leaders on behalf of the Dalits is bringing some positive results. Dalit representatives are now being included in local government and school committees. Thanks to increased awareness, skills training and some cash support provided by Dalit NGO, some villages are now making climate resilient adaptations and are diversifying livelihoods. One example is the setting up of pure drinking water small businesses.



Swapon Kumar Das is Executive Director of Dalit NGO

However, Swapon firmly believes that the help received to date is not sufficient. He reflects ruefully that one of the downsides of the elevation of the Bangladesh by UN from being a low-developing country to a developing-country status by 2026, is that it is now more difficult for a small NGO like Dalit NGO to attract support from donors and international development aid.



Indeed, a fear is that despite Dalit NGO's advocacy efforts, the needs and rights of Dalits are not on the radar in the implementation of the [Bangladeshi Government Delta Plan 2100 \(BDP2100\)](#). Dalit NGO were not consulted in its development. The BDP2100, according to a [Dutch government website](#) [iii], is designed to achieve a safe, climate resilient and prosperous Delta by the year 2100 noting that 'water provides opportunities to invest, to learn and to grow economic and social opportunities'.



The question is what provisions are being made locally and nationally, and what climate actions are being taken globally so that all Bangladeshi citizens, including Dalit children, will be able to survive, grow, learn and thrive in this unique and climate sensitive part of world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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ICDI has been a partner of Dalit NGO based in Khulna, Bangladesh since 2015. Swapon Kumar Das its Executive Director.

NOTES

[i] The actual number of Dalits living in Bangladesh is disputed. Based on 25 years work Dalit NGO estimate the number to be more than 10 million out of total population of almost 170 million. However, recent (August 2023) statistics from Department of Social Services identify the total number of Dalits living in Bangladesh to be 1.5 million, a considerably reduced number compared to the Department's earlier estimation of 6.5 million.

[ii] The Hindu based caste system exists in Bangladesh despite Muslims being in the majority. For more information on caste-based discrimination see this Working Paper from Indian Institute of Dalit Studies

[iii] BDP2100 was developed in close cooperation with the Netherlands.

