



Social Exclusion and Multiple Discriminations of Harijan Community in Rajshahi, Bangladesh

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Abstract: The *Harijan* community in Bangladesh is one of the most marginalized and disadvantaged groups in society. They face exclusion from the broader community and are deprived of basic necessities. The aim of this research is to investigate the various forms of social exclusion and discrimination experienced by the *Harijan* community in their daily lives. By utilizing a qualitative methodology, the study reveals that social exclusion contributes to various types of discrimination, and both factors have a detrimental impact on the *Harijan* community. Through conducting in-depth interviews and analyzing documents, this research demonstrates that social exclusion resulting from caste and occupation-based stigmatization hinders the integration of *Harijan* individuals into mainstream society and leads to multiple forms of discrimination. The study argues that caste and occupation-based social exclusion restricts the *Harijan* community's access to housing, basic necessities, social connections, education, income, and employment opportunities, thereby perpetuating a life filled with discrimination for this community.

Keywords: Harijan, Social exclusion, Discrimination, sweeper community, and Rajshahi.

I. INTRODUCTION

The *Harijan* community is recognized as a highly marginalized group, commonly referred to as the 'Untouchable', within both the Hindu caste system and broader society. In this Indian subcontinent, the *Harijan* people, also known as *Dalits*, *Sheboks*, *Mehthar*, *Hari*, etc., are involved in 'untouchable' and 'impure' cleaning services of waste by carrying ancestral curses of legacy who have been segregated from so-called civilized society based on religion, caste, and social status (Islam, 2017). Due to their hereditary occupation, sweepers experience discrimination and subordination in Bangladeshi society (Sultana and Subedi, 2016). Mahatma Gandhi introduced the term '*Harijan*' which means the 'Child of Hari (God)' for referring to the same groups of people (Naher and Hasan, 2017). So, to some extent, the terms '*Dalit*' and '*Harijan*' are used interchangeably, but in Bangladesh, '*Harijan*' refers to Hindu '*Dalits*' mostly involved in cleaning services (Naher and Hasan, 2017). Noticeably, one percent of the total population of Bangladesh is the *Harijans* (Chowdhury, 2009). The sweeper community was brought into Bangladesh during the Mughal period in 1608 (Chowdhury, 2009). Later, when municipalities were formed during the British era, a sizable migration of sweepers occurred through state-sponsored middlemen (Asaduzzaman, 2001). Their language remains Madraji, Telugu, or Hindi, not Bangla (Chowdhury, 2011).

The forms of jobs, they were brought here to do were undesirable to the local people (Hossain, 2017). Consequently, their identity was constructed as 'alien' to the wider society and was stigmatized as 'dirty' and 'polluting'; therefore, they were considered untouchable, which resulted in social exclusion and isolation (Hossain, 2017). Though their lifestyles and characteristics are somewhat different from other people, the socioeconomic conditions of this community, along with other exploited classes, are because they have been living in all parts of the subcontinent (Uddin, 2015). As a result, they are socially oppressed, economically deprived, culturally subjugated, and politically powerless (Islam and Uddin, 2008). No one

came forward to take the initiative to improve their fate after the 1947 participation period or the 1972 liberation period (Saha and Paul, 2003). As human beings, they must interact with mainstream people for many necessary things in everyday life (Dutta *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, the purpose of the study is to highlight various aspects of social exclusion and to explore the nature of various discriminations against the *Harijan* community in Rajshahi, Bangladesh.

II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

- To get knowledge about the socio-economic conditions of the *Harijan* community.
- To know the various aspects of their social exclusion.
- To explore the nature of various discriminations against them.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Conceptual Perspective

The Social exclusion framework has been used to explain socio-economic exclusion and the vulnerable position of the *Harijan* community in urban contexts. Social exclusion is a process and a state that prevents individuals or groups from full participation in social, economic, and political life and from asserting their rights (Islam and Nath, 2012). This approach can facilitate comprehension of the diverse facets and mechanisms that culminate in a state of exclusion from active participation in life and social attempts at large. Social exclusion focuses on the multi-dimensionally, on the fact that people are often deprived of different things at the same time (de Haan, 2000). Social exclusion denies persons and communities “of equitable access to social services and of access to assets and predictable livelihoods as well as decent work” (Köhler *et al.*, 2009). Barnes *et al.* (2002) measure social exclusion in the areas of “housing, health, education, social relations, and participation” (as cited in Silver, 2007). Social exclusion, stems from discrimination, thus, leads excluded people to multiple deprivations and bar them from full participation in the social life (Hossain, 2017). Social exclusion is inherently connected to diverse types of deprivation. So, the social exclusion concept is central in this study, and it provides a useful framework for analyzing the present situation of *Harijan* people in Bangladesh about their caste-based exclusion, discrimination, and vulnerability.

3.2 Study Design

We conducted a cross-sectional study using a qualitative methodology to better understand how social exclusion and deprivation were created and practiced within the *Harijan* community in Rajshahi, Bangladesh. The researchers explored the process of being excluded and deprived through everyday practices of the *Harijan* community such as through accommodation, civic amenities, social relationship and identity, access to education, choice of profession, health hazards and occupational safety and political exploitation among the studied population.

3.3 Study Site and Population

The present study was conducted among two *Harijan* colonies of Rajshahi, Bangladesh (*Gourhanga Railgate Sweeper Quarter* and *Hatemkhan Harijanpalli*). *Gourhanga Railgate Sweeper Quarter*, locally known as *mathorpotti* (sweeper living area), is located on the western side of Gourhanga railway gate and the northern side of the railway line in Rajshahi Metropolis, falling under ward no. 15 of Rajshahi City Corporation (RCC). We found that there are 37 households, and the number of the total population is 223 in *Gourhanga Railgate Sweeper Quarter*. *Hatemkhan Harijanpalli*, commonly known as *mathorpotti*, is located in the central region of the northern part of Rajshahi City Corporation, falling under Ward no. 11. These lands are owned by the Bangladesh Railway and the Rajshahi City Corporation respectively. These study areas comprise seven distinct sub-castes, namely *Hela*, *Hari*, *Lalbegi*, *Dome*, *Raut*, *Banshfore*, and *Rishi*. As per the last National Census conducted in 2011, *Hatemkhan Harijanpalli* has 285 holdings, with a total population of 1397 individuals (715 males and 682 females) (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (BBS), 2015). However, from the field study, we found 312 households with a population of 1625 in this *palli*.

3.4 Data Collection, Sampling, and Data Analysis

The current investigation was carried out from September 2022 to March 2023. To acquire data from the *Harijan* community, purposive sampling was used to investigate the extent of awareness, perception, and current practices relating to social exclusion and multiple discriminations among the *Harijan* community residing in these study areas. 20 key informant interviews (KIIs) were carried out with community leaders, religious leaders, and NGO workers. 40 in-depth interviews (IDIs) were conducted with both male and female household members. Furthermore, 2 focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted to gain insight into the community's perceptions and attitudes towards their social exclusion and the various discriminations they regularly encounter. A thematic approach was employed to analyze the data. Throughout the analysis process, salient themes and sub-themes were identified. The themes were triangulated using data from various sources, including observation, KIIs, IDIs, and FGDs. Subsequently, a summary of the accumulated data was recorded under each sub-theme. Finally, the interpretation of the data was conducted manually, taking into account the *Harijans'* lived experiences.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Exclusion from civic amenities

The majority of respondents discussed their own experiences with living in crowded areas. This specific location has been designated by the City Corporation. They are living in a separate geographical location due to their traditional occupation from the British colonial period (Dutta *et al.*, 2022). They (*Harijan* people) cannot move to other locations mainly for two reasons (Hossain, 2017). Firstly, they do not have right to land and secondly, they cannot afford rental private accommodations outside their colony with the meagre income that they earn from their menial jobs (Hossain, 2017). Nonetheless, individuals who can afford private rental accommodations are unable to reside there due to the discriminatory attitudes of *non-harijan people*, who view them as unclean and impure and consequently prohibit their presence in such dwellings. As one of the participants (IDI, female, and age 34) reported:

"I have five children. Every member of my family lives in a single dilapidated tin-shade room. Tin leaks and rainwater falls from the roof. It is challenging to go to the common toilet during night-time due to the absence of a personal latrine. Cooking has to be done in front of the gate of the room. It is not called living. We cannot survive anymore."

As per the regulations set forth by the City Corporation, several respondents have indicated that they are currently employed by the City Corporation and have been provided with a single room in *Harijanpalli* to accommodate their entire family. Without working with City Corporation, any person or family cannot live in here (Dutta *et al.*, 2022). Another participant (FGD, male, and age 40) reported:

"Harijanpallis are the designated areas of residence for our community, as we are unable to secure rental accommodations outside of these colonies. The local populace, who are considered mainstream, are disinclined to rent to us due to their perception of us as unclean and untouchable. They fear that our presence in their houses would result in the contamination of their living spaces."

Employees of RCC are given a single room, but not those who work for other government, semi-government, or private organizations. As a result, many families may occasionally have to share this one room. Another participant (FGD, female, and age 24) reported:

"We share a home with my family and my husband's youngest brother-in-law. You won't be able to guess how we can sleep together. We lack privacy, room for furnishings, and a place for the kids to study. It's difficult to explain to you how we manage in such a little space."

Residential segregation of the *Harijan* people is quite a visible scenario across the country and has been established as a rule rather than an exception (Azad *et al.*, 2016). So, the densely sheltered style results in the social exclusion and deprivation of *Harijans* from the mainstream. The residences are devoid of fundamental amenities such as a cooking range, bathroom, toilet, and even a consistent supply of domestic and drinking water for everyday use. One of the respondents narrated:

“Bathing in the pond is not always possible, due to overcrowding. So I have to bathe openly in the tube well located on the roadside in front of onlookers. I feel very shy then. Additionally, procuring drinking water requires navigating numerous disputes and contests, resulting in a significant waste of time. I have no private toilet. So, I have to use common toilets. There is also competition, which is undesirable.”

Due to the lack of a proper sewerage system, when they bathe or wash their cloths at these open spaces, water spreads around and makes nearby areas muddy and filthy (Hossain, 2017). In a study conducted by Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement (BDERM) and Nagorik Uddyog in 2015, found that 89% of rural *Dalits* use shared (common) latrines and 43% of their toilets are hanging latrines (IDSN *et al.*, 2018). It has come to our attention that the colony in question lacks proper waste disposal facilities, resulting in residents accumulating their daily refuse at the entrance. Despite the city’s overall cleanliness, the colony remains dirty and unkempt.

4.2 Exclusion from Social Relationship and identity

We found that the issue with the *Harijan* people’s social position is more significant than their economic situation. The *Harijan* people, who dedicate their lives to maintaining the cleanliness of the city, are being segregated as members of the underclass. The common people of the civilized society never visit them and never even sit at a single table with them. Due to their conventional occupations, the majority of respondents stated that they had restricted access to public spaces, businesses, restaurants, barbershops, playgrounds, movie theatres, temples, music concerts, and cultural events. For example, one respondent (FGD, male, and age 42 years) reported:

“When we leave home for work, we take a plate and a glass with us. After getting hungry outside of the home, we try to eat at restaurants. But they don’t let us enter into it. We sit outside the restaurants where food is handed over to them on the plates and glasses carried by us. But they don’t say anything unless they recognize our identity.”

The marginalized group in question is subjected to pervasive mistreatment at the hands of the prevailing *Bengali* community. They do not have any social interaction with the wider society (Hossain, 2017). Even ‘public’ place is not always open to everyone (Naher and Hasan, 2017). It is clearly visible that hierarchy and discrimination exists in places that are supposedly open for all (Naher and Hasan, 2017). An elderly gentleman (IDI, male, and age 62 years) hailing from the *palli* in question recounted that he had availed the services of a barber on a couple of occasions for a shave or a haircut. However, on the third visit, the barber declined to provide him with a shave. This incident left him feeling deeply disheartened, prompting him to make the observation that,

“There must be two Gods - one responsible for the creation of individuals of higher status people, and another for those of lower status people.”

It is not permissible for the *Harijan* people to rent utensils from decorator shops. However, the local political leaders have made arrangements for separate utensils to be provided for them. This gesture is intended to foster a sense of inclusion for the *Harijan* people within society, thereby ensuring their contentment. Nevertheless, upon closer scrutiny, it becomes apparent that this measure only superficially promotes inclusion, as the politicians are subtly perpetuating their exclusion. This stigmatization has been continued inter-generationally (Hossain, 2017). As a result, from their advent to Bangladesh they have been facing a ‘rapture of social bond’ (Hossain, 2017). *Harijan* people themselves do not know by what name they are known by the common people or the whole world; ‘*mathor*’ or ‘*harijan*’ or ‘scheduled caste’ or ‘*Dalit*’. One of the respondents (KII, male, and age 47) reported:

“The Harijans are adherents of the Sanatan Hindu faith, whereas the Dalits or scheduled caste, as per their definition, encompass individuals from lower social strata belonging to Hinduism, Islam, and other religions, who are subjected to caste-based discrimination and ostracized as ‘untouchables’ in society.”

Though the terms ‘*Harijan*’, ‘scheduled caste’, and ‘*Dalit*’ are in one way or another contentious, the ancient forms of discrimination and deprivation remain irrespectively widespread in relation to all the untouchables (Azad *et al.*, 2016). In 2013, the government of Bangladesh introduced a policy for the socially and economically disadvantaged communities and categorized them into three types- *dalit*, *harijan*, and *bede*. The policy defines ‘*Harijan*’ as ‘people who are known as *harijan* in the society and do not hesitate to introduce them as *harijan*’ (Department of Social Service, 2013). Now, many Hindu *Harijan* people changed their religious identity. For the untouchable sweepers, conversion to Christianity offered an avenue to an alternative identity. Through such acts of conversion, converted sweepers aspire to move to a new social position. In India, for those lowest in the caste hierarchy, religious conversion not only provided a path for reconfiguring social boundaries, and improving social positions but it also offered an opportunity for rejecting hierarchies and enacting resistance and assertion (Gupta, 2014). One of the respondents (IDI, male, and age 49) reported:

“I have changed my religion. During my time as a Hindu, I did not receive any form of social welfare. However, upon embracing Christianity, I began to receive assistance and support from non-governmental organizations. This phenomenon is also observed in India.”

As indicated by these interviews, the concepts of hierarchy and economy are pivotal factors in elucidating the reasons behind the conversion of Hindu *Harijan* people to Christianity. As a result, several social identities with nuanced aspects of how the *Harijan* community themselves see their stigmatization and persecution have been formed through the counter-discourse of resistance.

4.3 Exclusion from Access to Education

The majority of the respondents have concurred that education is an indispensable element for the upward social mobility of an individual. The distinct identity of *Harijan* children has resulted in the creation of an environment that fosters maltreatment and humiliation by their peers, as well as discrimination by their teachers and school administration. Discriminatory practices have also been reported about seating arrangements and access to common facilities such as washrooms and drinking water. *Non-harijan* students frequently subject *Harijan* students to teasing and behave in a discourteous manner by verbally abusing and insulting their family background, parents’ profession, and caste. As a result of these daily humiliations, many students opt to discontinue their education. One of the participants (IDI, male, and age 41) told the reason he left a government school:

“When I initially started school, my teachers didn't teach me properly, and my classmates mistreated me. Mainstream students did not sit with me or share their meals with me because ‘I was untouchable’. So I left the school.”

Poor economic status and higher cost of education lead to creating less interest in education and demotivated them from education (Beg *et al.*, 2020). In a study conducted by BDREM and Nagorik Uddyog in 2014 (IDSN *et al.*, 2018) found that around 26% of the respondents face obstacles in getting admission to the non-community schools due to their family and caste identity. The Government has undertaken measures to safeguard diverse underprivileged groups from discrimination and stigmatization. Certain groups have been granted reserved quotas for their employment in the public sector and educational establishments. Public universities have implemented quotas for *Dalits* to facilitate their access to higher education. In 2013-14 academic year, Dhaka University introduced quota for *Dalits* for the first time (Daize, 2018). Lack of education keeps them unconscious about their rights to use their agency as citizen and internalize their deprivations as normal (Hossain, 2017).

4.4 Exclusion from Choice of Profession

In the study area, it was observed that individuals belonging to the *Harijan* community in Rajshahi are frequently compelled to engage in particular forms of labour due to their designated caste status. The occupation most commonly associated with them is that of ‘*Jat sweepers*’ or ‘*Harijans*’. Among those who work as cleaners, very few work with the government institutions including the Railway departments; most of them either work in different private business and non-government organizations or work as independent casual sweepers, peddling their services in the villages like day laborers, popularly known as ‘*baltir kaj*’ meaning working with a bucket (carrying buckets during the paddling to serve the toilets and septic tanks)

(Naher and Hasan, 2017). At present, this community is employed under the purview of the City Corporation, Municipal Corporation, or other public/governmental offices within our nation, with a remuneration that is modest in nature, job insecurity, a substandard quality of life, and social as well as legal marginalization from the mainstream. Their livelihood has not yet been changed a little (Chowdhury, 2011). Caste and occupation based discrimination and poverty bar their children's access to education while social exclusion and lack of social network as a result of social exclusion bar their access to the job market (Opel, 2000). They involved too low social conditions that changed their traditional occupation and engaged in new occupations (Toppo *et al.*, 2016). Moreover, the traditional job becoming more competitive to them because the government and semi-government agency have been recruiting non-professional sweeper from other upper cast community (Chowdhury, 2011). However, they are excluded from greater labour market (Hossain, 2017). One of the participants (IDI, male, and age 30) expressed his experience in the job market,

"My father went to his boss with me when I graduated and asked him to appoint me. I was invited to join as the sweeper. Maybe he considered my caste rather than my qualification. How can I join such a post as a graduate? This is what aggravates our parents and our other juniors. Regardless of our educational background, we are aware that we will not get hired."

Insecurity of getting or tenure of jobs, lobbying, deduction of salaries without definite causes, lack of taking proper steps on occupational safety and health are frequent incidents faced by the people of *Harijan* Community (Islam, 2017).

4.5 Health Hazards and Occupational Safety

The *Harijan* community plays a significant role in maintaining the cleanliness of urban areas. Their duties involve the removal of debris, collection, and disposal of solid waste, as well as the recycling of waste materials. However, the manual nature of their work exposes them to various risk factors, including exposure to exhaust fumes, extreme noise, toxic substances, and dust particles. Nearly all of the participants acknowledged that they were exposed to unpleasant odours at work more frequently, especially while they were sweeping and collecting trash from huge collection bins. The issue gets worse during the monsoon because of the persistent rain, which produces a terrible odour. One of the participants (FGD, female, and age 34) reported:

"Especially during the monsoon season, I can smell a bad odour. The odour is quite strong and occasionally still unbearable. I have lost my appetite and feel weak."

Another participant (IDI, male, and age 36) reported:

"A dense cycle of black dust is produced around me while I manually sweep the street. Due to the lack of rain this time, the dust concentration increased. Since it is part of our profession, there is no way for us to escape it. Through this circumstance, we gain."

Dalits face discrimination in accessing medical amenities in public, private, and even NGO facilitated centers (IDSN *et al.*, 2018). During our observation, it was discovered that a significant proportion of the *Harijan* population do not wear masks while removing street dust, thereby elevating their susceptibility to various airborne diseases. Additionally, several participants from diverse sources reported experiencing respiratory and dermatological issues. One of the respondents (KII, male, and age 49) reported:

"Many Harijans suffer from chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, bronchioles, bacterial pneumonia, pulmonary embolism, breathing problems, etc., according to a health examination. They regularly come into contact with germs that spread via the air, which is the cause."

We found that occupational safety and health hazards were not a major concern among the *Harijan* people. Additionally, the lack of availability of protective equipment and monitoring of health status limit the usage of PPE (Personal Protection Equipment) (Kabir *et al.*, 2015).

4.6 Political non-participation and exploitation

The *Harijan* community is among the groups that are least represented in local administration. They cast ballots during elections, but their votes essentially have no impact on the results, and they have little leverage in the local government bodies. Although members of the *Harijan* community are eligible to vote just like any other Bangladeshi, they rarely participate in local government elections. Even if they compete, they will lose. There were around 330 instances of violence against the Hindu community during the 2001 general election period in Bangladesh (Islam and Parvez, 2013). In Domar, Nilphamari, one ‘*Dalit*’ candidate ran for the counselor post in the Union Parishad election, then all the other candidates and ‘*Non-Dalit*’ dominant people became united against him with the slogan - “resist the Sweeper” (Naher and Hasan, 2017). Uday Das, an untouchable, took the nomination for the Upazila election in Tala, Satkhira and he also suffered threats of withdrawal from hooligans, while other candidates campaigned to stop the participation of a ‘cobbler’ in the election (Islam, 2009). One of the respondents (IDI, male, and age 52) reported:

“We have no interest in Politics. It doesn’t matter to us who wins the election or not because we know that no matter who wins, our situation will not change.”

The impact of politics on their lives is minimal, as they remain distant from any political ideology or affiliation. Their primary aim is to endure and overcome all adversities that come their way. Consequently, as responsible citizens, they exercise their right to vote without discerning the qualifications of the political candidates.

V. CONCLUSION AND POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The situation of the *Harijan* community in Bangladesh is a matter of great concern. Despite being citizens of Bangladesh, the *Harijan* people are subjected to social exclusion and various discriminations. The socio-economic condition of the Harijans is deplorable, and they reside in unhygienic environmental areas, living on the poverty line. In most cases, they are unable to meet their basic needs such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare. Their occupation category is such that they are unable to lead a better life. Unfortunately, their rights are not adequately reflected in our constitution, and they are deprived of their actual privileges. The current government has undertaken various activities to improve the quality of life of the underprivileged communities and to include them in the mainstream of society. From the financial year 2012-13 to 2018-19, two programs were implemented to improve the quality of life of the underprivileged communities. In the financial year 2019-20, this program was separated and is now being run under the name “Livelihood Development Program for Backward Communities”. The *Harijans*’ lives, however, have not been improved by this initiative. Therefore, both the public and private sectors should implement a sustainable development plan that guarantees the *Harijan* community access to the same rights and services as the general public. In this sense, a quota system for the *Harijan* people should be implemented in both education and employment. The *Harijans*’ lack of land and crowded living conditions are among their biggest issues. The government should restore the land and lease it to the residents with the option to borrow money to construct homes.

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