

# Gram Bikash Kendra

Haldibari, Parbatipur, Dinajpur

## Report on- 21<sup>st</sup> March: International Day for the Reduction of Racial Discrimination

### Background:

In Bangladesh today, the Dalit/harijan community numbers approximately 55 lakh people. The situation of this community exemplifies one type of racial discrimination which is really based on profession. Gandhi gave the name harijan (or 'son of god') to the community of sweepers and cleaners that keep our public spaces clean: this group is just one part of the wider Dalit community.

The oppression of the Dalit/harijan people has long been a problem in Bangladesh. The Dalit/Harijan community is politically, socially, economically

and mentally isolated from the mainstream community. For instance, members of the community cannot eat in the hotels of the mainstream community, nor perform puja with the rest of society. While historically, this community has been employed in sweeping and cleaning public space, today even these jobs are slowly being taken away from them and given to mainstream community people. For many years, politicians have solicited the votes of the Dalit/harijan community through promises of assistance, whilst failing to deliver on any of these promises.

The 21<sup>st</sup> March was designated by... as an international day for the Reduction of Racial Discrimination. This year, it has been celebrated with programmes in 30 districts, including Dinajpur and Joypurhat. Gram Bikash Kendra has been working with the Dalit/harijan community for the last four years. This year, GBK was the leading organization in observing 21<sup>st</sup> March celebrations. Mofazzal Hossain Dulal, Chairman of Dinajpur Sodor Upazila, attended as the chief guest.

### Participants:

Various community leaders, NGO activists (RDRS, CDA, SUPK, GKAP, World vision, SUSTAIN, UDPS and others), local politicians and peoples from greater communities attended the gathering on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2009. Approximately 700-800 Dalit/harijan (women, men, youths and children ) community people attended.



## Activities :

- Organizing committee meeting with the participation of dalit /horizon community leaders
- Community meeting at their own communities
- Pestering by GBK's 50 branch offices as well as other 5 partners NGOs
- Festoon Hanging in different crowded place of Dinajpur Town
- Signature Campaign
- Introductory speech
- Speeches of invited speakers
- Speech of Chief Guest
- Closing remarks and thanks
- Rally through Dinajpur town



## Brief Summary of the Speeches given by the speakers:

### **Sahader Dev Bashfor, Secretary Harijan Oikko Parishad, Dinajpur zila**

- Noted that in all religious books, human beings have a responsibility to love one another, but that in society, people are not fulfilling this responsibility
- Noted that the government neglects Dalit and Harijan communities
- Commended GBK for its work to secure the human rights of the Dalit/Harijan communities
- Wished to draw the attention of the upazila chairman to the treatment of the Dalit/Harijan community members as dogs
- Urged the chief guest to give the Dalit/harijan community the chance to live as human beings



### **Kartik Kumar Das, Member of Harijan Oikko Parishad, Dinajpur District**

- Noted that many of the other Dalit communities, who work as cobblers or clothes-washers, are better treated than the harijan (sweeper) community
- Called for the government to take action to end discrimination against this community



### **Keya Roy, Humanitarian Activist**

- Called for an end to racial discrimination
- Demanded that all human beings must be treated as equals, regardless of the community they come from or the work they do.
- Noted that it is not God who divides society, but we who create the divides
- Noted that although the harijan community keeps our environment clean, their contribution to society continues to go unacknowledged
- Called for action to bring an end to this discrimination.



**Khairat Hossain, Executive Director, Gono Kalyan Parishad, Dinajpur district**

- Noted that it is society that creates the lines that divide us
- Asked why we do not let those who keep our society clean sit with us in the hotels?
- Urged that the harijan community work together to lift themselves up



**Mozalfar Hossain, ED Samaj Unnayan Proshikan Kendra, Dinajpur district**

- Requested the chief guest to fulfill the demands of the harijan community
- Pledged the support of his organization to the harijan community



**Engineer S.I. Shafiq, ED Sustain, Chiribandar, Dinajpur district**

- Condemned the social discrimination experienced by the Dalit/harijan communities
- Called for an end to this discrimination



**Bhupesh Roy, Programme Manager (Planning, Monitoring and Training), Gram Bikash Kendra**

- Noted that this day is being observed all over Bangladesh
- Noted the historical significance of this day, which began as a struggle to end racial discrimination in 1861, and which the UN declared would be observed on 21<sup>st</sup> March each year
- Noted that GBK has worked with the Dalit/harijan community for the past 4 years, and has set up 4 schools and 1 home for Dalit/harijan children in Dinajpur district
- Called for an initiative from all the speakers to bring discrimination against the Dalit/harijan community to an end
- Explained about the process and initiatives with different activities for 10 days by 15 different organizations throughout Bangladesh



**Shafiqul Haque Chutu, Mayor, Dinajpur Municipality**

- Noted that the situation of the Dalit/harijan community is already improving
- Reminded the audience that the pace of this improvement will depend on the attitude and behaviour of society, and how willing society is to change
- Called for change to begin at the family-level
- Noted the unemployment problem of the Dalit/harijan community, and urged that education is made a priority for these communities



### **Kulin Bashfor, Parbatipur Dalit Leader**

- Noted that it has been 38 years since Bangladesh became independent, but nothing has been done by the government to improve the situation of the Dalit/harijan community
- Praised and thanked GBK for the work it has been doing for the last 4 years with the Dalit/harijan communities
- Asked the greater community note that, although the Dalit/harijan community is usually blamed for drinking alcohol, nowadays phensidyle, heroin are taken by greater community people
- Questioned what would happen to the Dalit/harijan community, in light of the new government's pledge to make great changes? He urged the government to end its inactivity regarding the Dalit/harijan community



### **SongKor Bashfor, Dinajpur Dalit Leader**

- Urged that the community makes education a priority for the Dalit/harijan community
- Called on chief guest to try to raise the salary of harijan sweepers



### **Speech of the Chief Guest, Mofazzul Hossain Dulal, Chairman, Sadar Upazila Dinajpur.**

- Noted that Dr Ambedkar, author of the Indian constitution, was a member of the Dalit community
- Urged the audience to remember that change *is* possible
- Called for education to be made a priority, and requested GBK and Manusher Jonno to take the lead in trying to provide this for Dalit/harijan communities
- Reminded the audience and participants that securing the rights of the Dalit/harijan community will not be an easy process. It will require a social movement from the Dalit/harijan community to demand their rights, as well as a positive and receptive attitude from the state
- Called on the government to extend its safety net provisions, such as VGD and VGF cards, to the Dalit/harijan community



### **Chairperson, Kuldeep Bashfor**

- Stated twin demands of the Dalit/harijan community: education for the young and employment for the old
- Thanked GBK for arranging the day's programme
- Thanked all participants, guests and audience for attending
- Reminded all that the struggle for the rights of the Dalit/harijan community should be peaceful



## Rally and Submission of Memorandum:

After the end of the discussion meeting, a large rally marched from the Engineering Institute to Lily Cinema Hall Road, past Station Approach and the Municipality Office, Zila School, and finally to the District Commissioner's office. As the day of the rally was an off day, formally no officials were present at the office. However, the Additional



District Commissioner was present and the memorandum was submitted to him. Afterwards, the rally again crossed Dinajpur town and returned to the Engineering Institute field.

## Achievements

- This is the first time in the life of horizon and dalit people in Dinajpur that they met in a large gathering and raise the voice of their demand.
- They were able to draw the attention of the greater community people about their rights and demands
- Their confidence is being increased in managing this type of event
- Around 600 signatures were collected in support of the Dalit/harijan community's demands.
- The national press people covered the event



## Presenter:

Mrs. Riupali Das, an young lady of horizon community presented the discussion meeting.