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RESEARCH PAPER

SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONDITIONS OF HARIJAN COMMUNITY IN RAJSHAHI, BANGLADESH

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Keywords: Socio-economic, Livelihood, Untouchable, Harijan community, Rajshahi.

Publication date: 14.04.2023

Abstract

The *Harijan* community is a marginalized group in society, subject to various socio-economic disparities and inequalities. The study aims to identify the socio-economic conditions of the *Harijan* community in Rajshahi City, Bangladesh, with the objective of observing how they maintain their social and economic activities. Using a mixed-methods (combination of quantitative and qualitative) research design, a sample of 170 individuals was randomly selected from 'Ram Krishna Harijan Palli' (Ward No.6), and data were collected through a semi-structured questionnaire. The findings indicate that the majority of respondents (96.47%) are *Sanatan* believers and have completed primary education (41.76%). Additionally, the majority of respondents work as scavengers (42.35%) or cobblers (27.65%). Furthermore, 42.94% of respondents spend between BDT 3001 and BDT 5000 on monthly food expenditures, and 57.06% of households incur medical costs ranging from BDT 100 to BDT 500 per month during illness, with 45.88% seeking treatment from MBBS doctors. It is strongly recommended that policymakers develop effective measures to improve the conditions of the *Harijan* community, with a focus on raising awareness of their socio-economic issues.

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1. Introduction

The terms ‘*Dalit*’ and ‘*Harijan*’ are used interchangeably, but in Bangladesh; ‘*Harijan*’ refers to Hindu *Dalits*, mostly involved in cleaning services (Naher and Hasan, 2015). In Bangladesh, numbers of the ‘low castes’ are defined to themselves as ‘*Dalits*’ or ‘*Harijans*’, the ‘downtrodden’ people, to emphasize the fact that they have been exploited, oppressed, and excluded generation by generation. The term ‘*Harijan*’, which means ‘untouchable’, is now also applied to the defenseless and exploited people, and this term includes not just the scheduled castes but also the economically oppressed classes, which also include the scheduled tribes, landless laborers, and all those who are economically exploited (Islam, 2022). Mahatma Gandhi coined the term ‘*Harijan*’ instead of untouchable, which means ‘Son of God’. Here ‘*Hari*’ is another name for the God ‘*Vishnu*’ (higher level Godhead) (Chowdhury, 2011; Kabiret *al.*, 2018; Dutta *et al.*, 2022). The American Heritage published dictionary of English has also described *Harijan* as the ‘Child of God’ (Vadivel, 2016).

In fact, the *Harijan* community is known as a more marginalized and distinct social community within the Hindu caste-ridden system and the mainstream (Daize, 2018; Dutta *et al.*, 2022), whose identity is often characterized by the

manual and low-status nature of their occupations (Kabiret *al.*, 2018). They scavenge in Bangladesh’s cities and towns and are designated as ‘untouchable’ within the caste system of the Indian subcontinent (Asaduzzaman, 2001; Sultana and Subedi, 2016). Because they are not capable of other professions and are poor, they have always been enduring in the vicious cycle of poverty (Chowdhury, 2011). They face widespread poverty and economically, most of them are still the poorest of the poor, underprivileged, subjected to ostracization and food insecurity, and subjected to land grabbing, violence and forced conversion (Mandal, 2014; Minority Rights Group, 2016; Daize, 2018). Besides, due to their hereditary occupation, they have been facing various forms of discrimination, oppression, subordination and disabilities in Bangladeshi society (Sultana and Subedi, 2016; Daize, 2018). Although the Constitution of Bangladesh promises equal rights for all of its citizens, thousands of members of the *Harijan* community are still treated as ‘untouchables’ and are ostracized by the society (Daize, 2018). Eventually, there are a number of challenges and constraints that affect the rights and equal opportunities of the *Harijan* community to enjoy fundamental human rights. Most notably, this concerns the

lack of access to education, poverty issue, health care and other basic amenities, valued employment, the right to own a property or land and exclusion from political power or influence, discrimination against women, bonded labor and child labor (IDSN, 2008; Islam and Parvez, 2013). The key objectives of the study are to focus on the socio-economic profile of the *Harijan* communities of Rajshahi City and to find out their traditional professional trends as well as their livelihood strategies. Besides, the study also tried to find out various forms of discrimination and develop some suggestions to improve their socio-economic situation.

2. Methodology

2.1 Study Design

The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods to analyze the current socio-economic conditions of the *Harijan* community in our society. We collected data for this discussion using a questionnaire survey, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussion methodology. We were able to explore the interviewees' personal and social experiences, opinions, and feelings through in-depth interviews that followed a semi-structured interview guide. Both scheduled and unscheduled

questionnaires were used to increase flexibility in the data collection.

2.2 Study Site and Population

The study was undertaken at *Ram Krishna Harijan Palli*, Rajshahi. It is situated on the southern side of Kazi Nazrul Islam Sarani (Laxmipur-Kashiadanga City Bypass) in Laxmipur, word no.6 of Rajshahi City Corporation. In the eighties of the twentieth century, this slum was shifted here for the construction of the Laxmipur GPO (General Post Office). The *palli* is basically divided into two parts by a pond and a public road. The western part of the village is known as *Domepara*, as it is mainly inhabited by *Domes* (mortuary workers). The eastern part of the village is mainly inhabited by *Rabidas*, or cobbler communities; hence, it is locally known as *Muchipara*. This *Harijan palli* is also known as *ID Ambagan Harijan Palli*, as the settlement was established in *Ambagan* behind ID (Infectious Disease) Hospital. Almost all the residents of this *palli* follow the *Sanatan* (Hindu) religion. Five clans of castes were found in the study area. They are *Dome*, *Rabidas*, *Hela*, *Raut*, and *Banshfore*. There is no census or data available on demographic or social aspects of people who are discriminated against based on work and descent in Bangladesh (Uddin, 2015). So from the

field study, we found 182 households with a population of 1125.

2.3 Data Collection, Sampling, and Data Analysis

The investigators collected data from September 2022 to February 2023 by using a survey, 10 key informant interviews (KIIs), 25 in-depth interviews (IDIs), and 2 focus group discussions (FGDs) as data collection tools. We found that there are 182 households and a total population of 1125 (male-581 and female-544) in the study area. Several specifications were implemented to identify the respondents in order to accomplish the study objectives. The

data was gathered from individuals who met the following criteria: (i) being the head of the household; (ii) belonging to the active population; and (iii) residing in the designated study area for a minimum of five years. And we selected 170 respondents, which are maintained by the unit of analysis. A total of 20 representatives participated in two structured FGDs that were held in two communities. SPSS and Excel software have been used to process the collected data in order to produce the desired statistics and interpretation. Additionally, the mean and standard deviation are calculated, along with frequencies and percentages.

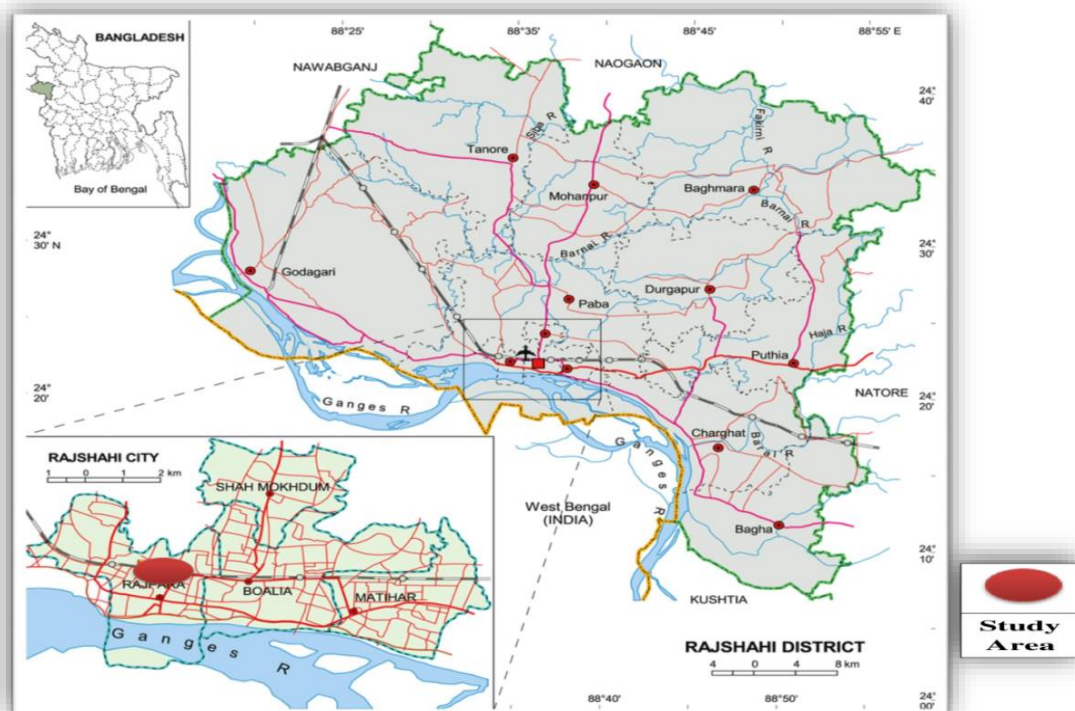


Figure 1. Location map of the study area (Modified after Uzzaman *et al.*, 2019)

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Clans (Sub-castes) of the Harijan

Community in the Study Area

There was no consensus among the respondents regarding the basis of sub-castes and the ranking of the sub-castes (Raha, 1982). According to the *Bangladesh Harijan Oikya Parishad* (BHOP), sweepers belonging to eight clans are referred to as *Harijans* (Sarker,

2012), but this perspective lacks historical substantiation. The data indicates that 36.47 percent of the respondents belong to the *Dome* clan, while 38.83 percent are *Rabidas* or *Muchi* or Cobblers (Table 1). Additionally, 23 (13.53%) respondents belong to the *Hela* clan, and 8.82 percent are *Raut*. Only 2.35% of respondents belong to the *Banshfore* clan.

Table 1. Different Clans of the Harijans in the Study Area

Clans	Male		Female		Total	
	Frequency	%	Frequency	%	Frequency	%
<i>Dome</i>	30	17.65	32	18.82	62	36.47
<i>Rabidas</i>	31	18.24	35	20.58	66	38.83
<i>Hela</i>	13	07.65	10	05.88	23	13.53
<i>Raut</i>	07	04.12	08	04.70	15	08.82
<i>Banshfore</i>	02	01.18	02	01.18	04	02.35
Total	83	48.84	87	51.16	170	100

Table 2. Personal Information of the Harijans in the Study Area

Parameters	Number of respondents (Out of 170)	% of respondents	Range/Category	Mean	Standard Deviation
Age	67	39.41	20-40	44.35	12.81
	84	49.41	41-60		
	19	11.18	61-80		
Sex	83	48.82	Male		
	87	51.18	Female		
Religion	164	96.47	Hindu		
	6	3.53	Christianity		
Marital Status	28	16.47	Unmarried		
	126	74.18	Married		
	4	2.35	Divorced		
	12	7.05	Widow		
Educational Status	33	19.41	Illiterate		
	71	41.76	Primary (i-v)		
	54	31.77	Secondary (vi-x)		
	12	7.05	Higher Secondary and above		
Occupation	28	16.47	Mortuary worker		
	47	27.65	Cobbler		
	13	7.65	Day labour		
	10	5.88	Petty Business		
	72	42.35	Scavenger		
Monthly Income	56	32.94	4000-8000	9200	2588.66
	92	54.12	8001-12000		
	22	12.94	12001-16000		

3.2 Personal Information of the

Respondents

In South Asia, it is practiced badly through the caste systems due to their diversified occupation, language, religion, and identity of the population and it is not an exception in Bangladesh (Lary, 2006 quoted in Dutta *et al.*, 2022). The data reveals that approximately 49.41% of the respondents belonged to the age group of 41 to 60 years (Table 2). Moreover, 48.82% of the respondents were male and 51.18% were female. The study shows that approximately 96.47% of the respondents adhered to the *Sanatan* religion. For the untouchable sweepers, conversion to Christianity offered an avenue to an alternative identity (Sultana and Subedi, 2016). We found that approximately 54% of the primary respondents had a monthly income ranging from BDT 8001 to BDT 12000, with an average income of BDT 9200 (Table 2). But a study conducted about the sweeper community in Chittagong by Chowdhury (2011) found that the average income of the respondents was BDT 11575. One of the respondents (IDI, male, and age-66) reported:

"I have completed my education up to the fifth grade, while my wife, unfortunately, lack any form of literacy and is unable to even sign her own name. Our son is fortunate enough to attend school; however,

our daughter is not receiving any formal education. Despite my primary occupation as a sweeper, I am compelled to engage in laborious work on numerous occasions in order to sustain my family. This typically results in a monthly income of approximately 6,000 taka."

In the study area, we found the majority of the respondents (74.18%) were married, and only 2.35% of the respondents were divorced. Most of the respondents had either primary (41.76%) or secondary education (31.77%), with only 7.05% having completed higher secondary education and above. Raha (1982) found that 80 percent of the Harijans were illiterate. But we found the illiteracy rate of the respondents was comparatively better (19.41%). Higher percentages (42.35%) of the respondents were scavengers, 27.65% were cobblers, and 16.47% were mortuary workers (Table 2).

3.3 Monthly Household Expenditures of the Respondents

Expenditure depends on income, and expenditure is higher than income for low-earning people (Chowdhury, 2011). The data showed that 42.94% of the total expenditure was on food each month, with a range from BDT 3001 to BDT 5000, and the average food expenditure was BDT 3517.65 (Table 3). One of the respondents (FGD, female and age-42) reported:

“ Due to the insufficiency of our dual income in relation to the size of our family, we find ourselves living from hand to mouth. Despite my husband's role as the head of our household, both he and I jointly make decisions regarding our family matters.”

Among the majority of the respondents, 57.06% of the households had to bear the medical cost of BDT 100 to BDT 500 per month, whereas the average medical cost was BDT 634.41. The average treatment cost for a suffering household is 7.95 percent of their total income (Chowdhury, 2011).

Table 3. Monthly Household Expenditure of the Harijans in the Study Area

Expenditure	Number of respondents (Out of 170)	% of respondents	Range	Mean	Standard Deviation
Food	69	40.59	1000-3000	3517.65	1431.67
	73	42.94	3001-5000		
	28	16.47	5001-7000		
Medical	97	57.06	100-500	634.41	456.14
	41	24.12	501-1000		
	32	18.82	1001-2000		
Education	126	74.12	50-500	503.82	433.45
	20	11.76	501-1000		
	24	14.12	1001-2000		
Miscellaneous	52	30.59	100-1000	3552.94	1163.22
	104	61.18	1001-3000		
	14	8.23	3001-4000		

The study reveals that the percentage of households that have a monthly education budget of 50 to 500 BDT was 74.12, whereas the average education cost was BDT 503.82 (Table 3). Following that, only 8.23 percent of households spent more than BDT 3000 on miscellaneous items, with more than half of households (61.18%) spending between BDT 1001 and BDT 3000 on the same (Table 3).

3.4 Housing and Hygiene Conditions of the Respondents

As the target group lives in urban areas,

the majority of the respondents have access to urban utility services such as supplied water, electricity, etc. (Beg *et al.*, 2020). The data revealed that a majority of the respondents (71.76%) resided in semi-pacca houses. A study on sweeper communities in Chittagong, Bangladesh, by Chowdhury (2011) showed that the average size of the houses is 153 square feet, where more than 5 people have been living, and on average, they are paying 1505 taka rent for each house. We found a significant proportion (95.24%) lived in their own houses (Table 4). 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 at night due to the absence of a personal latrine. Cooking has to be done in front of the room. It is not called living. We cannot survive anymore."

The results indicate that a large majority (81.18%) of households had access to

private latrines, and 18.82% of households utilizing public latrines (Table 4). Additionally, 87.06% of households had access to electricity as their primary source of energy. But, in a study about ethnic groups in Bangladesh conducted in Dhaka, Beg et al. (2020) found that 39.3% of respondent families have no access to electricity, and sometimes they use other electrical connections illegally.

Table4. Living Facilities of the Respondents in the Study Area

Parameters	Category	Number of respondents (out of 170)	% of respondents
Types of houses	Pacca	20	11.76
	Semi-pacca	122	71.76
	Kacha	48	28.24
Nature of houses	Own	162	95.24
	Rent	8	4.76
Sanitation System	Private	138	81.18
	Public	32	18.82
Sources of energy	Electricity	148	87.06
	Kerosene	22	12.94
Sources of cooking fuel	Electricity	11	6.47
	LPG	22	12.94
	Wood	137	80.59
Sources of drinking water supply	Tube well	128	75.29
	WASA Water	42	24.71
Sources of domestic water supply	Pond	112	65.88
	WASA Water	58	34.12

We found the majority of households (80.59%) used wood for cooking fuel purposes. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the respondents, specifically 75.29 percent, utilize tube wells as their main source of drinking water. Furthermore, a significant proportion of the participants, comprising

65.88 percent, utilize ponds to fulfill their domestic requirements (Table 4).

3.5 Health Conditions of the Respondents in the Study Area

Because of the unhygienic conditions and extreme poverty, this minor group of people also suffered from different diseases, such as fever, influenza,

diarrhoea, gastric, ulcer, malnutrition, etc. (Beg *et al.*, 2020). Based on the information in this study, it can be observed that 52 percent of the

individuals within the family unit experienced fever, while 26 percent of them were afflicted with skin diseases (Figure 2).

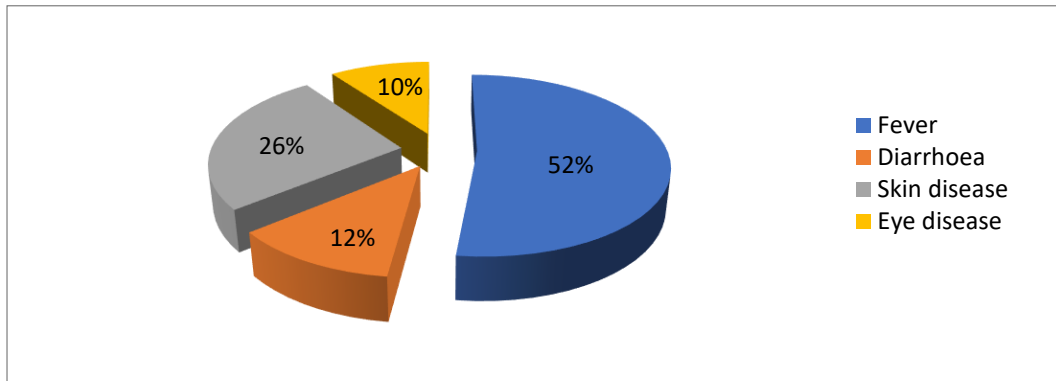


Figure 2. Most common diseases suffered by the respondents

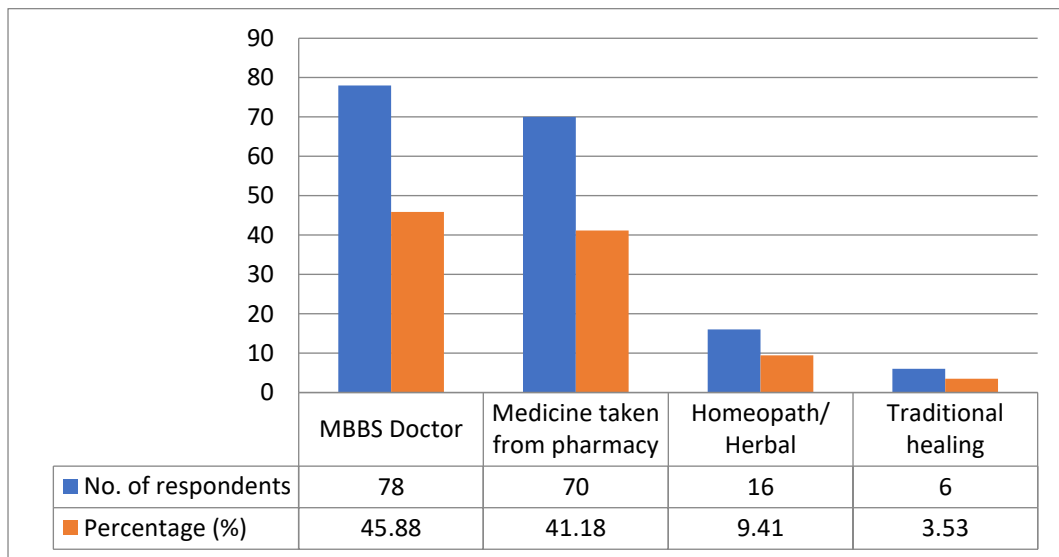


Figure 3. Place to seek treatment during illness

Furthermore, the study reveals that 12 percent and 10 percent of the respondents were affected by diarrhoea and eye disease, respectively. 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 unbearable. I have lost my appetite and feel weak.”

Almost one-third of participants reported that the high concentration of dust in and around their workplace might be the cause of respiratory problems (Kabir *et al.*, 2018).

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."

15% of the respondents said that doctors and dispensaries did not provide them with adequate treatment or medicine due to their caste and professional identity, and 26% said that a doctor or a midwife refused to visit a patient in their house (BDERM, 2018).

3.6 Traditional Livelihood Pattern of the Harijans in the Study Area

The *Harijan* community persists in their traditional occupations. Their livelihoods have not yet changed a little. Moreover, the traditional job is becoming more competitive for them because the government and semi-government agencies have been recruiting non-professional sweepers from other upper-caste communities (Chowdhury, 2011). The research findings indicate that 34.12 percent (58 out of 170) of the respondents have changed their former traditional occupations, while 65.88 percent (112 out of 170) continue to engage in their traditional occupations as a means of sustaining their livelihood (Table 5). Over the generations, the

sweeper community has not been changing their profession significantly due to different causes. Chowdhury (2011) showed that the respondents have been changing the traditional profession to another job at a rate of 9.5 percent, where their grandparents and parents were occupied as sweepers. One of the participants (IDI, male, and age 30) expressed his experience in the job market:

"My father went with me to his boss 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 qualifications. 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."

We found that there were various factors that contributed to the decision to leave traditional occupations (Table 5). A considerable proportion of respondents (32.76%) cited the desire to secure a better future for their children as the primary reason for not wanting them to pursue traditional occupations, while 17.24% of respondents attributed their departure to the declining demand for such occupations. Conversely, 37.93% of respondents attributed their decision to the expansion of education and

increasing awareness, and 8.62% cited occupations. low income from their traditional

Table 5: Changes in the traditional occupations of the Harijans in the study area

Respondent's answer	Reasons	Number of respondents (out of 170)	% of respondents
Yes	For a better life	19	32.76
	Losing demand for traditional professions	10	17.24
	Expansion of education and consciousness	22	37.93
	Income of the traditional profession is low	5	8.62
	Free from social stigma	2	3.45
Total		58	100
No	Protect the clan tradition	17	15.18
	Satisfied with their lifestyle	29	25.89
	Opportunities in other professions are low	66	58.93
Total		112	100

Additionally, 3.45% of respondents indicated that a career change was necessary to liberate their children from the social stigma associated with being a scavenger (Table 5). Similarly, to get rid of the stigma of untouchability, many Dalits discontinue their traditional occupations (Kamal et al., 2010). The study reveals that a significant proportion of respondents expressed a desire for their children to pursue traditional occupations for various reasons (Table 5). Specifically, 15.18 percent of respondents cited the preservation of their clan tradition as a motivating factor. Additionally, 58.93 percent of respondents indicated that the limited opportunities in alternative professions influenced their preference for traditional occupations. Conversely, 25.89 percent of respondents reported satisfaction with their current lifestyle (Table 5).

3.7 Social Bondage of the Harijan Community

Social acceptance was uncommon due to their living style and very tough traditional and ritual bindings to make relationships with other people (Shawon and Rabbi, 2017). In contemporary times, numerous matters necessitate the collaboration of associations with local individuals. Despite being a minority group, we found the *Harijan* community to be closely knitted and exhibited strong interconnections. The study reveals that a significant proportion (96.7%) of the respondents affirmed that they uphold positive relationships with members of their community, and 93.53% of the total respondents confirmed their affiliation with local individuals for various reasons, while the remaining 6.47% of respondents stated that they do not associate with local people. Of these, 46.54% of respondents claimed that they

associate with local individuals because they reside together. Additionally, 23.27% of respondents explained that they associate for business purposes, while 13.84% of respondents stated that the transaction of money is the purpose of their association. Furthermore, we found that 6.92% of respondents associate for employment purposes, and the remaining 1.88% of respondents associate with local individuals for other purposes.

3.8 Access to Justice by the Community

Access to justice is defined as the ability of people to seek and obtain a remedy through formal or informal institutions of justice for grievances in compliance with human rights standards (UNDP, 2004). We found that each of these five sub-castes has its own *samaj* or *panchayat* to settle the disputes taking place within the colony. We found that there is no specific formation for the *panchayat* committee. Members are not elected but rather selected on the basis of seniority. In all the *samaj* committees of this *palli*, there is apparently no female representation. The study reveals that internal conflicts in the nature of quarrels, fights over petty issues among the community people, inter-caste love affairs, marriage outside the clans, theft, teasing, or sexual harassment are settled by the *panchayat* committee. If the

dispute is not settled through the *panchayat* committee, a second reference is made to the ward counselor of the concerned area. Finally, they refer the case to the police station if it is not solved by the ward counselor. They never directly go to the police station. After all initial remedial options are exhausted; they refer the case to the police station.

4. Conclusion and Policy Implications

Despite being citizens of Bangladesh, minority and marginalized groups, including the *Harijan* community, continue to face social disparities and inequalities. The socio-economic status of the *Harijan* community is significantly disadvantaged, with many living below the poverty line in unsanitary environments. They struggle to meet their basic needs, such as food, clothing, shelter, education, and healthcare, as their occupation category limits their ability to lead a better life. Unfortunately, our constitution does not adequately reflect their rights, and they are deprived of their rightful privileges. Due to various challenges, including poor economic conditions and socio-economic disadvantages, they are unable to form a strong and influential collective. Regrettably, the government and relevant authorities have not taken sufficient initiatives or actions to improve their socio-economic conditions and

livelihoods. Consequently, they have remained impoverished for centuries. Therefore, both the governmental and non-governmental sectors must devise a development strategy and policy that guarantees the *Harijan* community equal access to the rights and services that are enjoyed by mainstream society. The *Harijan* community persists in their traditional occupation from one generation to the next, owing to a lack of literacy and expertise. It is imperative that the government provide technical education to overcome this obstacle. With regards to the matter at hand, it is recommended that a quota system be implemented in both education and employment for the *Harijan* community. One of the primary challenges faced by the *Harijan* community is their lack of land ownership, resulting in their residing in overcrowded dwellings. It is therefore imperative that they be provided with the opportunity to rehabilitate and lease government-owned land, with the added benefit of loan facilities to construct suitable housing.

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