



## COI QUERY

Country of Origin	Bangladesh
Main subject	Methor people
Question(s)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Information on the Methor people, in particular on their history, customs, religion, traditional practices</li><li>2. Information on reported cases of social discrimination against the Methor</li><li>3. Information on their living conditions in the Sylhet area</li></ol>
Date of completion	7 December 2018
Query Code	Q125
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## COI QUERY RESPONSE

### Information on the Methor people, in particular on their history, customs, religion, traditional practices

Although caste systems are most commonly associated with Hinduism, in Bangladesh the system exists as well and is adopted by sections of the Muslim majority.<sup>1</sup> Regarding the lowest group or the so-called 'untouchables' in this system, both Hindus and some Muslims are referred to as Dalit in Bangladesh, like in India and Nepal.<sup>2</sup> In Bangladesh, Hindu Dalits are also called 'Harijan', or 'Harijon' in the local language, while 'Muslim Dalits' often are categorised as *arzal*.<sup>3</sup> 'Arzal' or 'Ajlaf' means 'lowest off all'.<sup>4</sup>

According to the International Dalit Solidarity Network, 'members of the "low castes" increasingly refer to themselves as Dalits – the "downtrodden" people – to emphasize the fact that they have been exploited, oppressed and excluded through generations'.<sup>5</sup> The term Dalit does not have a Bengali origin but has been introduced to the language from discourses in the international arena.<sup>6</sup> Although there are no official statistics, the total number of Dalits in Bangladesh is estimated by the International Dalit Solidarity Network between 3.5 and 5.5 million.<sup>7</sup>

According to the Bangladeshi academic Chowdhury, there are a lot of subgroups, mostly related to their occupation, among the Muslim and Hindu Dalits. One of them is the Methor subgroup which belong to the latter category. Regarding this group, he wrote the following:

'Most Dalits, particularly the untouchables among the Hindus in Bangladesh, are the descendents of Indians from Bihar, Uttar Pradesh (Kanpur, Hamirbag, and Jobbalpur), Andhra Pradesh and many other parts like Gourakpur, Chapra, Uriya, Maddaparpur, Baliha, Patna, Motihari, and Bhagalpur. From the inception of setting up the capital in Dhaka by Islam Khan during Mughal regime in 1608, sweepers were appointed for cleaning activities. It is a common opinion that they had been brought largely by the British colonial regime to provide menial services for them since 1830s. They have been popularly known as 'Methor' (derived from

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<sup>1</sup> International Dalit Solidarity Network, Discrimination against Dalits in Bangladesh, ISDN Briefing Note, 2015, ([url](#)), p. 2; The religious composition of the population in Bangladesh is: Muslim 89.1%, Hindu 10%, other 0.9% (includes Buddhist, Christian) (2013 est.). See CIA World Factbook, Bangladesh, last updated 23 October 2018, ([url](#)).

<sup>2</sup> Sultana, H. and Subedi, D.B., 'Caste System and Resistance: The Case of Untouchable Hindu Sweepers in Bangladesh', in: International Journal of Politics Culture and Society, 29 (1), June 2015, ([url](#)), p. 22.

<sup>3</sup> Surinder, S.J., and Ghansyam, S., Comparative Contexts of Discrimination: Caste and Untouchability in South Asia, in: Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 45, No. 48, 27 November 2010, ([url](#)), p. 100.

<sup>4</sup> Chowdhury, I.U., Caste-based discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Bangladesh, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Working Paper Series, Volume III, No. 7, 2009, ([url](#)), p. 8.

<sup>5</sup> International Dalit Solidarity Network, Discrimination against Dalits in Bangladesh, ISDN Briefing Note 2015, ([url](#)), p. 2.

<sup>6</sup> Hossain, M.S., Multiple Deprivations: Schooling Experience of Dalit Children in Bangladesh, Research paper Institute of Social Studies, The Hague, December 2016, ([url](#)), p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> International Dalit Solidarity Network, Bangladesh, n.d., ([url](#)).



Persian word Mihtar' literally meaning ruler/prince) that signifies degradation and disgust. (Asaduz Zaman 2001)'.<sup>8</sup>

According to an article in the Guardian, Methor is a 'derogatory term' which means "those who clean shit".<sup>9</sup> In a study named 'Sanitation Success Stories', it is mentioned that pit-emptying is done by sweepers which are usually called 'methor' in Bengali.<sup>10</sup> Chowdhury mentions two subgroups among the Methor; the Harijon<sup>11</sup>/ Methor (sweeper/cleaner) who speak Jabbalpuri and Hindi, and the Harijon/methor (sweeper/cleaner) who speak Telegu.<sup>12</sup>

In a study on the livelihood situation of the Harijan community in Bangladesh the author Shahin Parvez reported that 'Harijans are a socially isolated and neglected community of our society. They are engaged in sweeping and cleaning wastes, human sludge, etc. They are commonly known as "methor" in our country'.<sup>13</sup> Parvez further noted regional differences; 'nowadays in Chittagong city they are called "shebok" (helper or aide)'.<sup>14</sup> In their academic paper on Hindu untouchable sweepers of Bangladesh, Sultani and Subedi stated that the Methor are also known as 'Dhangor' or 'Bhangir' in the Bengali society, where they work mainly as sweepers on the city roads and clearing sewage systems and are employed by municipalities, city corporations, and private organisations.<sup>15</sup>

The majority of Dalits are landless in Bangladesh<sup>16</sup> and live in segregated 'colonies' which are arranged by the government 'because most of them are not allowed to stay within the locality'.<sup>17</sup> These colonies are also known as 'Palli' and headed by a 'Sardar, Pradhan and Chowdhury depending on the customs and usages of each Palli'.<sup>18</sup> These colonies also have their own informal or traditional justice delivery system called 'Panchayat' which is the 'only mechanism for the settlement of disputes'.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Chowdhury, I.U., Caste-based discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Bangladesh, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Working Paper Series, Volume III, No. 7, 2009, ([url](#)), pp. 10-11.

<sup>9</sup> Guardian (The), The dysfunctional megacity: why Dhaka is bursting at the sewers, 21 March 2018, ([url](#)).

<sup>10</sup> Hanchett, S., et al., Sanitation Success Stories: Nine Bangladesh Case Studies, January 2018, ([url](#)), p. 7.

<sup>11</sup> A Harijon or Harijan is a member of a hereditary Hindu group of the lowest social and ritual status. See Oxford Dictionary ([url](#)). Harijan means 'Children of God' and first introduced by Mahatma Gandhi to refer to the Dalits' back in 1932, but objected by others. See Daily Star (The), Ensuring rights of the Harijan community, 18 September 2018, ([url](#)).

<sup>12</sup> Chowdhury, I.U., Caste-based discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Bangladesh, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Working Paper Series, Volume III, No. 7, 2009, ([url](#)), pp. 10-11.

<sup>13</sup> Parvez, S., Identifying Livelihood Patterns of Harijan Community and Their Coping Strategies of Different Vulnerabilities Situation- A Sociological Investigation, 10 May 2016, ([url](#)), p. 7.

<sup>14</sup> Parvez, S., Identifying Livelihood Patterns of Harijan Community and Their Coping Strategies of Different Vulnerabilities Situation- A Sociological Investigation, 10 May 2016, ([url](#)), p. 7.

<sup>15</sup> Sultana, H. and Subedi, D.B., 'Caste System and Resistance: The Case of Untouchable Hindu Sweepers in Bangladesh', in: International Journal of Politics Culture and Society, 29 (1), June 2015, ([url](#)), p. 25.

<sup>16</sup> BDERM & Nagorik Uddyog, 3rd Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review Factsheet for the UPR of Bangladesh (30th Session, 2018), 25 March 2018, ([url](#)).

<sup>17</sup> Chowdhury, I.U., Caste-based discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Bangladesh, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Working Paper Series, Volume III, No. 7, 2009, ([url](#)), p. 19.

<sup>18</sup> Razak, A. 'Access to Justice by the Harijan Community: An Appraisal of its Traditional Justice Delivery System', in: The Harijans of Bangladesh: Living with the Injustice of Untouchability, Uhmat, R. (ed.), Empowerment through Law of the Common People (ELCOP), Dhaka, 2016, ([url](#)), p. 8.

<sup>19</sup> Razak, A. 'Access to Justice by the Harijan Community: An Appraisal of its Traditional Justice Delivery System', in: The Harijans of Bangladesh: Living with the Injustice of Untouchability, Uhmat, R. (ed.), Empowerment through Law of the Common People (ELCOP), Dhaka, 2016, ([url](#)), p. 7.

According to Razzak, the 'sweeper community' is patriarchal. That means that males 'exercise control over the family, and take charge over the community affairs as well'.<sup>20</sup> Men also play predominate roles in political leadership, moral authority, social privilege and exercise control of property. Women are not represented in the aforementioned traditional justice system.<sup>21</sup>

Furthermore, Razak stated that the Dalit/Harijan are endogamous; which means that they are only allowed to marry within their own caste. Breaking the marriage rules can lead to punishment which is called Jaat-bondhi; the offenders will be excommunicated.<sup>22</sup> However, in their study among sweeper communities in Bangladesh, Razzak and Partha reported that 'this practice is withering day by day'. They found a few couples who broke the ritual norms and had gone through many problems, but were finally accepted by the community.<sup>23</sup> The practice of dowry is very common in marriage. 'Often, they take loans with high interest to pay for the dowry'.<sup>24</sup>

As already mentioned, Harijan are Hindus, but they also possess animist beliefs and worship a number of gods and goddesses.<sup>25</sup>

### Information on reported cases of social discrimination against the Methor

In general, Dalits face discrimination and segregation based on their descent.<sup>26</sup> According to Razak, 'Among others, falling under the category of Dalit, sweeper and the *Harijan* community in Bangladesh are the most marginalized and socially excluded section of people'.<sup>27</sup> Chowdhury wrote that the Harijan community is isolated in every aspect of life. They are segregated from the 'mainstream society'.<sup>28</sup>

The Harijan community is used to face the practice of untouchability and different kinds of discrimination from both the State and the society.<sup>29</sup> In their study on Dalit communities in northern

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<sup>20</sup> Razzak, A., 'Family and Kinship System of the Harijan Community in Bangladesh', in: *The Harijans of Bangladesh: Living with the Injustice of Untouchability*, Uhmat, R. (ed.), Empowerment through Law of the Common People (ELCOP), Dhaka, 2016, ([url](#)), p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> Razzak, A., 'Family and Kinship System of the Harijan Community in Bangladesh', in: *The Harijans of Bangladesh: Living with the Injustice of Untouchability*, Uhmat, R. (ed.), Empowerment through Law of the Common People (ELCOP), Dhaka, 2016, ([url](#)), p. 9.

<sup>22</sup> Razzak, A., 'Family and Kinship System of the Harijan Community in Bangladesh', in: *The Harijans of Bangladesh: Living with the Injustice of Untouchability*, Uhmat, R. (ed.), Empowerment through Law of the Common People (ELCOP), Dhaka, 2016, ([url](#)), pp. 19-20.

<sup>23</sup> Razzak, A. and Partha, A.R., 'Access to Justice by the Harijan Community: An Appraisal of its Traditional Justice Delivery System', in: *The Harijans of Bangladesh: Living with the Injustice of Untouchability*, Uhmat, R. (ed.), Empowerment through Law of the Common People (ELCOP), Dhaka, 2016, ([url](#)), p. 17.

<sup>24</sup> Rahman, S., *An Ethnographic Journey Through the Lives of Urban Dalits in Bangladesh*, Final Report, HEKS/EPER, 14 November 2016, ([url](#)), p. 21.

<sup>25</sup> Parvez, S., *Identifying Livelihood Patterns of Harijan Community and Their Coping Strategies of Different Vulnerabilities Situation- A Sociological Investigation*, 10 May 2016, ([url](#)), p. 6.

<sup>26</sup> UN Women, *Dalit rights activists break new grounds in South Asia*, 24 July 2018, ([url](#)).

<sup>27</sup> Razzak, A., 'Family and Kinship System of the Harijan Community in Bangladesh', in: *The Harijans of Bangladesh: Living with the Injustice of Untouchability*, Uhmat, R. (ed.), Empowerment through Law of the Common People (ELCOP), Dhaka, 2016, ([url](#)), p. 25.

<sup>28</sup> Chowdhury, S.L.K., 'Traditional Profession and Livelihood: A Study on Sweeper Community', in: *Journal of Economics and Sustainable Development*, Vol.2, No.3, August 2011, ([url](#)), p. 87.

<sup>29</sup> Daily Star (The), *Ensuring rights of the Harijan community*, 18 September 2018, ([url](#)).

Bangladesh, Nahar and Hasan reported that 'Jat Sweepers' are considered as the most marginalized group and seen as 'dalits among the dalits'.<sup>30</sup>

When it comes to living conditions, Dalits are facing discrimination in accessing proper housing. . They may be forced to live on the outskirts of towns, or in segregated colonies or informal settlements, and may also be subject to forced evictions and displacement.<sup>31</sup> In the field of education Dalits are excluded from institutions and are burdened 'with discriminatory practices' like cleaning classrooms, fetching water or are forced to sit on separate benches.<sup>32</sup>

Furthermore, the UN reported that social mobility is almost impossible for children because they are systematically denied' in all kind of opportunities, like getting food, education, health care jobs and civic rights They also noted that there is no official recognition of caste discrimination in Bangladesh.<sup>33</sup>

In January 2016, the Special Rapporteur of the UN Human Right Council noted that 'Within the Hindu community, Dalits constitute a subgroup characterized by additional vulnerability and stigmatization. For instance, Dalits are effectively prevented from performing certain rituals'<sup>34</sup>. Furthermore, the Minority Rights Group International reported that:

'Within the Hindu community, the Dalit population remains especially marginalized and subject to discrimination not only by the majority population but also by more affluent, higher-caste Hindus who may, for example, exclude them from certain rituals and from shared spaces such as temples, restaurants and markets. Isolated in remote rural settlements or segregated in poorly serviced urban 'colonies', they face widespread poverty, ostracization and food insecurity. Besides exclusion from many areas of employment, they have also been subjected to land grabbing, violence and forced conversion'<sup>35</sup>.

### **Information on the living conditions of Methor in the Sylhet area<sup>36</sup>**

Among all sources consulted and within the timeframe allocated to respond to this query, no specific information could be traced concerning the living conditions of Methor in Sylhet.

<sup>30</sup> Nahar, A. and Hasan, A.A.M., Dalit Communities Living in Railway Colonies/Lands in Northern part of Bangladesh, 2016, ([url](#)), p. 19.

<sup>31</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on minority issues, 28 January 2016, ([url](#)).

<sup>32</sup> BDERM & Nagorik Uddyog, 3rd Cycle of the Universal Periodic Review Factsheet for the UPR of Bangladesh (30th Session, 2018), 25 March 2018, ([url](#)).

<sup>33</sup> UN Women, Dalit rights activists break new grounds in South Asia, 24 July 2018, ([url](#)).

<sup>34</sup> UN Human Rights Council, Report of the Special Rapporteur on freedom of religion or belief on his mission to Bangladesh, 22 January 2016, ([url](#)), p. 11.

<sup>35</sup> Minority Rights Group International, Under threat: The challenges facing religious minorities in Bangladesh, November 2016, ([https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/MRG\\_Rep\\_Ban\\_Oct16\\_ONLINE.pdf](https://minorityrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/MRG_Rep_Ban_Oct16_ONLINE.pdf)), p. 9.

<sup>36</sup> Sylhet is a north-eastern district town in Bangladesh. For more information on poverty profiles in this town, see Uddin, M.F. and Huda, S.N., 'Poverty Profiles of Sylhet City Corporation: An MPI Approach', in: European Scientific Journal, Vol. 12, No. 31, November 2016, (<https://eujournal.org/index.php/esj/article/viewFile/8374/8014>).

Nonetheless, the general information presented below could be of relevance. In general, it is known that most Dalits live in extreme poverty.<sup>37</sup>

### Housing and access to land

As already mentioned above, Dalits are living in so called 'colonies'. These colonies are located at the 'most inhospitable areas' of a village or town where nobody else would like to live.<sup>38</sup> Several sources reported that living conditions in these colonies are harsh without adequate water, electricity or sanitation, and that people lacking proper housing.<sup>39</sup>

As already mentioned, the majority of Dalits are landless in Bangladesh. According to Rahman, Dalits can hardly buy and sell land due to their social status.<sup>40</sup> 'Often [they] live on common land and even then frequently threatened by eviction'<sup>41</sup>. In relation to this, the International Dalit Solidarity Network is asking for the repeal of Bangladesh's Vested Property Act of 1974. With reference to Professor Abul Barakat of Dhaka University, the state confiscated land from 925,050 Hindu households. As a result, the land is now in the hands of 0.4% of the population, 'mostly powerful politicians among the ruling Muslims'.<sup>42</sup>

### Employment

According to Rahman, Harijans cannot get other jobs like their traditional ones due to their social stigma. Besides, he noted that they are also losing their traditional jobs, instead of the government directive that 80 % of cleaning and sweeping jobs are reserved for the Dalits, which in reality is hardly practiced.<sup>43</sup> According to Islam and Parvez, this is due to 'fierce competition' where non-Dalits sometimes 'pay bribes to employees' to get jobs.<sup>44</sup> They also noted that those jobs are 'badly paid or exploitative'.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Islam, M. and Parvez, A., Dalit Initiatives in Bangladesh, Nagorik Uddyog & Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement, October 2013, ([url](#)), p. 19.

<sup>38</sup> Chowdhury, I.U., Caste-based discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Bangladesh, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Working Paper Series, Volume III, No. 7, 2009, ([url](#)), p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Chowdhury, I.U., Caste-based discrimination in South Asia: A Study of Bangladesh, Indian Institute of Dalit Studies, Working Paper Series, Volume III, No. 7, 2009, ([url](#)), p. 1; Islam, M. and Parvez, A., Dalit Initiatives in Bangladesh, Nagorik Uddyog & Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement, October 2013, ([url](#)), p. 18; Sultana, H. and Subedi, D.B., 'Caste System and Resistance: The Case of Untouchable Hindu Sweepers in Bangladesh', in: International Journal of Politics Culture and Society, 29 (1), June 2015, ([url](#)), p. 30.

<sup>40</sup> Rahman, S., An Ethnographic Journey Through the Lives of Urban Dalits in Bangladesh, Final Report, HEKS/EPER, 14 November 2016, ([url](#)), p. 22.

<sup>41</sup> Islam, M. and Parvez, A., Dalit Initiatives in Bangladesh, Nagorik Uddyog & Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement, October 2013, ([url](#)), p. 21.

<sup>42</sup> Upstream Journal (The), The Dalits of Bangladesh: The lowest of the Hindu castes, these "untouchables" fight for a voice, November 2009, ([url](#)).

<sup>43</sup> Rahman, S., An Ethnographic Journey Through the Lives of Urban Dalits in Bangladesh, Final Report, HEKS/EPER, 14 November 2016, ([url](#)), pp. 24-25.

<sup>44</sup> Islam, M. and Parvez, A., Dalit Initiatives in Bangladesh, Nagorik Uddyog & Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement, October 2013, ([url](#)), p. 19.

<sup>45</sup> Islam, M. and Parvez, A., Dalit Initiatives in Bangladesh, Nagorik Uddyog & Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement, October 2013, ([url](#)), p. 19.



## Education

In his study on urban Dalits, mostly the Harijans living in selected northern districts of Bangladesh, Rahman refers to the HEKS/EPER baseline survey 2013. This survey showed 'a literacy rate among male and female Dalits of 48.3% and 38.7% respectively. The highest rate of illiteracy was also found among the sweepers- Harijans'<sup>46</sup>. Furthermore, the survey results showed 'that 84.3% of the respondents mentioned poverty as the main reason for not attending schools'<sup>47</sup>. Also Islam and Parvez reported that poverty, beside 'caste discrimination within schools from both teachers and students', is a key reason why Dalit families choose for their children to work rather than attend school'<sup>48</sup>. To avoid discrimination some communities 'decided to establish their own school, where their children might feel welcome and secure'<sup>49</sup>. On the other hand, the aforementioned study of Rahman also showed that the acceptance of children in schools 'is gradually increasing'<sup>50</sup>.

## Health and Sanitation

Rahman reported that:

'Government being the basic service provider does not provide regular and adequate utility services to urban Dalit communities. The overall unhygienic situations in their community where they live in make them vulnerable to health and diseases. Scarcity of safe water, inadequate sanitation & drainage system, lack of hygiene, lack of knowledge of proper menstrual hygiene management, lack of solid waste disposal management system, congested & unhygienic living space are the severe problem & health hazards for the urban Dalits'<sup>51</sup>.

Furthermore, he noted that 'The water and sanitation facilities are very poor and inadequate which has a direct impact on health and hygiene of urban Dalits. There are some tube wells, open bathrooms and toilets in the colonies they live in'<sup>52</sup>. Parvez reported that 'Scarcity of safe drinking water in Harijan colonies all over the country is common'<sup>53</sup>.

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<sup>46</sup> Rahman, S., An Ethnographic Journey Through the Lives of Urban Dalits in Bangladesh, Final Report, HEKS/EPER, 14 November 2016, ([url](#)), p. 17.

<sup>47</sup> Rahman, S., An Ethnographic Journey Through the Lives of Urban Dalits in Bangladesh, Final Report, HEKS/EPER, 14 November 2016, ([url](#)), p. 17.

<sup>48</sup> Islam, M. and Parvez, A., Dalit Initiatives in Bangladesh, Nagorik Uddyog & Bangladesh Dalit and Excluded Rights Movement, October 2013, ([url](#)) p. 20.

<sup>49</sup> BD News Portal, Harijans take it upon themselves, 28 April 2017, ([url](#))

<sup>50</sup> Rahman, S., An Ethnographic Journey Through the Lives of Urban Dalits in Bangladesh, Final Report, HEKS/EPER, 14 November 2016, ([url](#)), p. 17.

<sup>51</sup> Rahman, S., An Ethnographic Journey Through the Lives of Urban Dalits in Bangladesh, Final Report, HEKS/EPER, 14 November 2016, ([url](#)), p. 20.

<sup>52</sup> Rahman, S., An Ethnographic Journey Through the Lives of Urban Dalits in Bangladesh, Final Report, HEKS/EPER, 14 November 2016, ([url](#)), p. 20.

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