

A Special Report:

40th International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (21 March 2005)

Dalit NGO Federation (DNF), an umbrella organization of more than 200 Dalit NGOs working for the rights and upliftment of Dalit community of Nepal, observed 40th International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination on 21st of March 2005 amid a function held at the auditorium of Nepal Tourism Board. Acting President of DNF, Mr. Ram Lakhan Harijan chaired the programme while Rt. Hon. Mr. Chakra Bahadur Shankar, Member of Raj Parishad Standing Committee was the Chief Guest. A few other prominent Dalit leaders and activists also occupied their places in the dais. More than 300 Dalits and friends of Dalits participated in the programme held from 2:00 pm to 5:00 pm. During the programme, two books ***Biography of Mohan Lal Kapali*** and ***Alternative Bill of Reservation for Dalits*** were launched, and three distinguished figures were felicitated for their contribution to Dalit movement of Nepal.

The International Day for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination is observed annually on 21 March. On that day in 1960, police opened fire and killed 69 people at a peaceful demonstration in Sharpeville, South Africa, against the apartheid "pass laws". Proclaiming the Day in 1966, the General Assembly called on the international community to redouble its efforts to eliminate all forms of racial discrimination from all over the world.

Three personalities felicitated

Mr. Keith D. Leslie, Country Director of Save the Children, USA, Sociologist Dr. Krishna Bahadur Bhattachan and Dalit woman leader Mrs. Mithai Devi Vishwakarma were felicitated for their distinguished contribution to Dalit movement in Nepal amid a function organized by Dalit NGO Federation of Nepal on the occasion of 40th International Day Against All Forms of Racism.

Mr. Leslie was honoured for his significant contribution to the upliftment of Dalits over the last two decades.

Dr. Bhattachan has accomplished a number of research studies on Dalit, and he is the one to identify 205 forms of discrimination to Dalits on the scientific ground.

Mrs. Mithai Devi Vishwakarma is the first Dalit woman leader to start the first ever Dalit women's organization called Pariganitnari Sangh in 2012 BS.

Mr. Mohan Lal Kapali, a living history of Dalit movement in Nepal, was invited as a distinguished guest. General Secretary of DNF Mr. Gajadhar Sunar, Advisors of DNF, Mr. Om Prakash VK and Mr. Hira Vishwakarma, Senior Dalit Leader & Central Committee Member of Rastriya Prajatantra Party (RPP) Mr. Pratap Ram Lohar were other guests. Hon. Mr. Rishi Babu Pariyar, Member of Upper House, and first elected President of DNF & former Member Secretary of National Dalit Commission (NDC) Mrs. Durga Sob were among others guests of the day.

The programme began by observing one minute silence to pay tribute to known and unknown martyrs' who laid their lives for Human Rights, Democracy and Dalit Rights. A sweet welcome song was presented by a member organization of DNF. Mr. Gajadhar Sunar, General Secretary of DNF welcomed all the participants to the programme. The programme was followed by the speech of Mr. Hira Vishwakarma, Advisor of DNF, who highlighted the reason to celebrate the day. He also claimed that it was DNF, which set a tradition to celebrate the day amid a great function. He expressed his satisfaction over the observance of the day by other marginalized groups such as Madhesis, Muslims and Janajatis from this year.

Both the books, Biography of Mr. Mohan Lal Kapali published by DEIP/DNF and Alternative Bill of Reservation for Dalits published by DNF, were launched by the Chief Guest. Writers of the books, Mr. Om Prakash VK and Mr. Bimal Bishwakarma, respectively highlighted the importance of books.

Chief Guest, Member of Rajshabha Standing Committee Rt. Hon. Mr. Chakra Bahadur Shanker conferred the plaque of recognition to three personalities for their distinguished contribution to the Nepalese Dalit movement. Mr. Keith D. Leslie, Country Director of Save the Children USA, Sociologist Dr. Krishna Bahadur Bhattachan and Dalit Women Leader Mrs. Mithai Devi Vishwakarma were felicitated by the Chief Guest, and the Acting President of DNF chairing the programme offered a shawl and bouquet to them.

Mr. Keith Leslie was honoured for his significant contribution to the upliftment of Dalits over the last two decades. Save the Children USA is one of the leading INGOs in Nepal, which started the programme in the Dalit sector for the first time, and Mr. Leslie has been instrumental all the time to have these programmes on the ground. Above all, Save the Children under his leadership has become the first INGO to have the largest number of Dalit employees (around 10 members on staff).

Dr. Bhattachan has accomplished a number of research studies on Dalit, and he is the one to identify 205 forms of discrimination to Dalits on scientific ground. Likewise, he has developed strategies for number of projects relating to Dalits. Above all, he has been a staunch advocate of Dalit rights wherever he finds the opportunities, notably with national and international dignitaries.

Mrs. Mithai Devi Vishwakarma is the first Dalit woman leader to start the first ever Dalit women's organization called Pariganit Nari Sangh in 2012 BS, and she was also one of the activists to enter Pashupati temple in 2011 BS. Above all, she has been a strong collaborator of her late husband Mr. TR Vishwakarma, who was a well respected Dalit leader of Nepal in early days of Dalit movements of Nepal, and he strongly advocated for the provision of punishment against practices of untouchability.

All three personalities felicitated spoke about their experience, and thanked the organizers for honouring them on such an auspicious day of 21st March.

Then, Mr. Pratap Ram Lohar, a Senior Dalit Leader spoke from the podium where he mentioned that he had been participating in the Dalit movement for three decades. He expressed his satisfaction over the achievements made by the movement and taking it to the international level as well.

Ms. Durga Sob, the first elected President of DNF and currently the President of FEDO also spoke on the day. She expressed her dissatisfaction that the Dalit movement of Nepal has still not been fully recognized, and raised the issue of female Dalits, who are half the total Dalit community. She also mentioned that everyone should understand the value and norms of such a big day, and hence her organization, FEDO, also organized an event to celebrate the day.

Hon. Mr. Chakra Bahadur Shankar, member of Raj Parishad Standing Committee as the Chief Guest of the function, congratulated the dignitaries felicitated, and asked other activists and leaders to take inspirations from them.

Finally from the Chair of the function, Mr. Ram Lakhan Harijan, Acting President of DNF, concluded the event. He thanked all the participants and honorable guests for their participation. In the meantime, he also appealed for making the issue of caste based discrimination a common agenda for all spheres of the society, as it is not the problem of Dalit alone, but a problem of the whole nation.

Report by Pratik Pande.