

The Enigma of Manual Scavenging in India

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Abstract

Manual scavenging is a serious issue that is harmful on multiple levels and due to the interconnected nature of its causes, the damage that it inflicts is extremely difficult to eradicate via a single legislation. It works simultaneously as a health hazard, a social problem and a source of intense psychological trauma, with damage that continues to harm the scavengers long after they step out of the unsanitary latrines and sewers. It may be compared to a curse that continuously erodes both physical and mental health over time, and as horrifying as the working conditions might be, the social stigma faced by the manual scavengers is even worse. They already lack adequate equipment and funds, but even something as minor as respect and approval isn't afforded to them- in both the filthiest of sewers and the most crowded of streets, they stand alone and suffer in the silence of people who were never given a chance to speak. Based on anecdotal evidences reported in secondary sources, the study attempts to understand the anathema of manual scavenging in India. Apart from token efforts on their part, politicians and bureaucracy as a whole are guilty for not enforcing the process of law to eradicate the menace of manual scavenging, thanks to the fact that society as a whole is largely desensitized to the trials and tribulations of manual scavengers.

Keywords: Manual Scavenging, Sanitation, Casteism

INTRODUCTION

Countries are built on lofty principles, and India is no different. Idealism has always been part of this country's national philosophy, manifesting in the oldest of its scriptures and the loftiest rhetoric of its speeches. Leaders furiously pontificate about the rise of a global superpower to paint pretty visions of a brighter future, but the only way that dream could ever be appreciated was if citizens closed their eyes

to the cruel reality of the present. We Indians are rather good at ignoring the filth that surrounds us- people defecating on the railway tracks and beaches, the broken sewer drains and pipes that stain the roads with murky waste, the massive nullahs that have turned into vast rivers of pollution and the spreading landscape of slums lacking basic hygiene and sanitation facilities.

But even though we might turn a blind eye to the sad

state of our society, the filth won't magically disappear- someone must perform the arduous task of sanitation. One would think that the people in charge of keeping our cities and villages clean would be afforded some measure of respect or recognition for their hard work, but the sad reality is that they're treated no better than the waste itself, no one knows their names and no one remembers their lives, none could live without them, but nobody cares if they die as their stories are lost in a swirling whirlpool of slime that drowns them in shame and misery. These are India's manual scavengers, saddled with the task of dipping their hands into the faeces left by the members of the world's largest democracy. Their liberty is confined to sewers and dry toilets, their equality can only be compared to the foul nature of what they handle, and the closest they can get to fraternity is an ostracized community that has suffered for years, is suffering now and shall very likely continue to suffer in the future.

CONCEPT, ORIGIN AND INCIDENCE OF MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA

Manual scavenging is the appalling practice of manually removing human excreta from dry latrines using bare hands, brooms or tin plates, physically carrying it in baskets as head-load for disposal at far off sites, cleaning septic tanks, sewers and gutters. Manual Scavenging in India has been a caste based and hereditary occupation carried out since ancient times by "untouchable among untouchables"-dalits who are placed at the bottom of caste hierarchy as well as dalit sub caste hierarchy. The origins of manual scavenging in India can be traced to Manusmriti or Hindu Social Order that laid out rules about purity or ritual avoidance of excreta and relegated its clean up to the polluting castes-untouchables. The inhuman practice of manual scavenging continued under the Mughal rule as enclosed dry latrines were constructed in line

with their purdah system. The Britishers legitimized this practice by building public toilets and creating official posts of manual scavengers to handle human excreta in all the key institutions (Gulalia, 2003).

In the absence of a systematic survey on the exact number of manual scavengers (those carrying night soil, cleaning railway tracks, septic tanks and sewer lines) engaged in all states and union territories, official figures are a gross misrepresentation of the actual incidence of manual scavenging in India. As per Socio Economic Caste Census 2011, there are 1.82 lakh households engaged in manual scavenging (includes only those carrying night soil since other categories were not enumerated) in rural India, certainly down from 1961 Census figure of 35 lakh such households. Maharashtra tops the list (63713 families engaged in manual scavenging) followed by Madhya Pradesh (23093), Uttar Pradesh (17619), Tripura (17332) and Karnataka (15375). According to civil society activists, there are an estimated 1.3 million dalits (around 95 per cent are women) engaged in manual scavenging in India (Sen, 2018).

ISSUES RELATED TO MANUAL SCAVENGING

Casteism is the first and foremost issue that directly or indirectly has abetted manual scavenging. The job has been historically solely reserved for the lowest among the dalits, considered as agents of pollution in the social hierarchy. The fear of physical abuse, ostracism and loss of livelihood forces many reluctant and hapless persons from the lowest strata of society to take up the abhorrent job for measly payment (women manual scavengers earn ten to fifty rupees per month per household and men earn around three hundred rupees per day for cleaning septic tanks and sewer lines), because it's still better than getting beaten up or starving to death. In the process, due to

lack of suitable life-saving equipment and medical facilities, the lives of these scavengers are endangered in no mean measure, and the several deaths that have occurred in thousands bear testimony to that fact. As per official figures, 22237 people die every year due to manual scavenging in urban areas.

Also, constant exposure to toxic gases and endless filth in septic tanks and sewers render these scavengers susceptible to life threatening diseases like tuberculosis, hepatitis, and various forms of skin and respiratory disorders and most of them die at an early age. Even on a psychological level, they are scarred for life owing to constant stigmatization, internalization and a complete lack of self-esteem, forcing many to take up alcohol and drugs to alleviate their suffering and drown their sorrows. Even the few liberated ones cannot break the shackles of centuries of casteism and ostracization, forcing them to eventually take up the job of manual scavenging, eventually accepting it as their destiny. There is singularly a chronic lack of job opportunities for them, as they are shunned by people of higher castes, who simply don't allow them to take up any other forms of employment, other than manual scavenging. Also, a lack of alternative skills and financial assistance leaves them with no option but to pursue the hateful job, just to remain alive and fend for their families (Beck & Darokar, 2005; Singh & Ziyauddin, 2009).

LEGAL PROVISIONS TO DEAL WITH MANUAL SCAVENGING

The scourge of manual scavenging was formally banned through the enactment of The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993. This Act not only prohibited the employment of manual scavengers but also construction and continuance of dry latrines. The penal provision included imprisonment upto one year and/

or a fine upto two thousand rupees. It was replaced by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. The revised legislation extends the prohibition to manual scavenging along railway tracks, open drains and pits, manual cleaning of septic tanks and sewers without protective gear and also calls for surveys and rehabilitation of identified manual scavengers. Offences under the Act are cognizable and non-bailable with violations attracting an imprisonment upto one year or a fine of fifty thousand rupees or both. Some of the rehabilitation measures include an initial one-time cash assistance of forty thousand rupees, scholarship to the children of manual scavengers, allotment of residential plots or financial assistance for construction of houses, training in alternative livelihoods with a monthly stipend of three thousand rupees, subsidies and concessional loans for taking up alternative occupations (GoI, 1993; GoI, 2013).

CHALLENGES IN THE ERADICATION OF MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA

While there are various laws enacted by the Government of India to eradicate the scourge of manual scavenging, the bitter fact is the absence of will or endeavor to effectively implement them. Apart from token efforts on their part, politicians and bureaucracy as a whole are guilty for not enforcing the process of law to eradicate the menace of manual scavenging, thanks to the fact that society as a whole is largely de-sensitized to the trials and tribulations of the manual scavengers. The country as a whole is conveniently unaware about the harrowing lives of the manual scavengers and their hellish conditions. It's an exercise in futility to enact laws and legislation, if there is a singular lack of initiative and urgency to completely eradicate the curse of manual scavenging from the face of this earth.

The pervasive and nebulous nature of manual scavenging makes it extremely hard to solve all its issues in a single fell swoop. Measures must be instituted at multiple levels to eliminate its causes and mitigate its effects, and stringent maintenance and monitoring is imperative for the prevention of recurrences. The primary issue with creating policies to reduce manual scavenging is they often fail at a formative level due to a glaring lack of reliable data. The first step is to amass a body of data on the incidence of manual scavenging in India, following which more specific measures may be taken. Funds allocated under the Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers remain unutilized for the lack of reliable information on the actual number of manual scavengers in the country (Deshpande & Kapur, 2018).

The social stigma faced by scavengers operates as a deterrent to pursuing alternative lifestyles, and ex-scavengers who set up new businesses or seek employment in the areas where they formerly worked in sanitation are often avoided or threatened., So the government must provide facilities to protect and rehabilitate them or to relocate their families if necessary, taking all possible measures to keep them from getting demoralized and resuming their old dehumanizing profession. The fact remains that sanitation is an important task, but the Indian conceptions of the task as something unclean makes society force lower castes into doing it. However, by installing modern sanitation technologies for faecal sludge management and cleaning of sewers, the State can remove the need for manual scavenging and greatly cut down on the death rates caused by contact-based infections and poisonous gas inhalation. Measures must be taken to spread awareness about the problems of manual scavenging and inform the people about the plight of those that thanklessly work to keep their cities clean. Media needs to cover the issue extensively and major politicians must integrate plans to eradicate manual scavenging into their manifestos. Another issue is that

the scavengers themselves are often unaware of the fact that their rights are being violated and that they deserve better, and most of them don't know about the authorities they need to approach in order to voice their complaints and seek solutions for their problems. Due to a culture of repression, many low-caste people are afraid to speak up, thinking of any kind of escape from the caste system as an impossible dream. By supporting them and giving them a platform to speak up for themselves and resist the oppression they have faced for centuries, we can empower them and pave the road to their emancipation. Once both the masses and the victims are ready to move forward to end the cruelties perpetrated by the caste system, the final obstacle to the attainment of a brighter future for scavengers will be removed.

CONCLUSION

India's ever-pervasive caste system works as a guillotine that severs the hopes of manual scavengers from the moment of their conception, an irrational system of shackles that pushes them, both figuratively and literally, into the filthiest spot in our society. Born into a disgustingly regressive and callous culture that doesn't even consider them human, manual scavengers aren't afforded the slightest opportunity to rise through the ranks of our rigid hierarchy, or to even pick a job that's slightly less dangerous. No words are uttered, but the ideology is clear- so what if they suffocate on the stench of a faecal mountain or get injured and trapped in the tunnels of waste that run under the streets we traverse daily? There's no point in hearing their screams or trying to save them from the infections that ravage their bodies, even if they perish, their families will carry on their task. There's always more of them, because once you're at the bottom of the hierarchy, there's no place to escape. The cycle goes on and on- we feast, they starve, we excrete, they clean it up, we move up in life, they crawl into sewers, we make grand speeches about

democracy and they live with the smell of our faeces in their noses and mouths. No matter how many of them die, we don't particularly care- who knew they were alive in the first place?

We can't help that our excreta stinks. But in a society that forces one class of people to slowly kill themselves by cleaning it up each day, the waste that festers in our toilets might actually be the least disgusting thing we produce. It isn't enough to develop flush toilets and modernized sewage systems to fix what we have done- the dalits once relegated to manual scavenging will simply be forced into another occupation that's probably just as demeaning. The official deadline to end manual scavenging ends in 2019. What needs to be fixed is our ideology, the way we think, or rather, the way we systematically prevent ourselves from thinking about anything that's considered inconvenient. It isn't an easy process. It isn't a quick one. But unless we stop turning a blind eye and actually take a good, hard look at ourselves, we're never going to improve. The manual scavengers of India desperately need help. This is their story.

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