



Manual scavenging – a life of dignity?

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In many of India's cities, domestic dry latrines are emptied daily, a task that has been forced traditionally on a group considered so lowly that they were placed outside the Hindu caste order. In spite of the fact that their 'out caste' position and work combine to reinforce their social ostracism, a latent fear persists, especially amongst their elders, that their livelihoods are being phased out along with dry latrines.

Few delight in filth or want to be engaged in an occupation such as scavenging. In the West, much of the process of handling sanitary waste is comparatively mechanized and protective clothing must be provided and worn when necessary. Yet, here too, it is evident that socio-economic status defines who does much of this work. In much of the developing South, this work is still performed manually for little pay and with few safeguards and by a social group which has largely failed to evolve beyond this traditionally assigned responsibility.

The research described here examines this much-neglected aspect of sanitation. It explores the lives and living conditions of scavengers in India

in order to identify changes they are experiencing. The factors mitigating against change are numerous, not least political apathy, the lack of low-cost options, a continued demand for 'low-cost' cleaning services, and a failure by an otherwise active civil society to acknowledge this human indignity. What is striking, but perhaps not surprising, is the muted responses of scavengers on this issue. People who have been forced over generations to manually handle other's excreta are unsure if they can 'claim' what they want.

What is manual scavenging?

Manual scavenging includes the manual lifting and removal of human excreta, both from private and also communal dry latrines. Manual emptying of latrines has been prevalent in Africa and China for many years but this was not assigned to members of any particular social group or gender.¹

In India, the task of scavenging was historically and permanently assigned to one social group, known by different names in different regions, but referred to here as Bhangis, Methars or Valmikis. This group belongs to the lowest tier – so lowly, that they were placed outside of the hierarchical Hindu caste system. The assigning of the task of scavenging to the Valmikis reflects the way that Hindu culture perceives human faeces.

In India, the term faeces implies impurity and pollution, both of which profane the ritual purification which is

the very basis of Hindu religion and culture. Hindu religion and culture requires the removal of faeces as far as possible from the household environment and determines that those considered most impure and polluted – the lowest caste groups – must perform this task.

In the caste system, Brahmans are considered to be the purest caste as a result of their occupational involvement in ritual and religious activities. These tasks are considered to be the most superior and purest of all social activities. At the other end of the social spectrum, the Dalits (untouchables) have historically been assigned the tasks of cremating the human dead, handling dead animals, cutting hair and nails. The Bhangis occupied the most polluted task – washing and cleaning processes associated with bodily excrement.

This association with polluting tasks meant that Bhangis were excluded physically, socially and morally from the larger village commune. If a higher caste person was touched by a Bhangi, a cleansing bath had to be taken. Brahmans consider that even the sight of a Bhangi requires purification by looking at the sun, moon or stars and rinsing the mouth with water.

Since Independence, the Indian Government established various commissions and committees to look into the practice of manual scavenging. Most of these initiatives recommend upgrading the services and working conditions of the Bhangis, but failed to



Women scavengers expressed their lifelong disgust for their work



Ridicule and abuse towards scavengers have persisted in many forms

break the primary ties linking this caste group to the practice of scavenging. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, announced in 1993, aimed to convert dry latrines into pour-flush latrines as well as to rehabilitate scavengers. However, as is described here, there has been little success in the official conversion of dry latrines or the rehabilitation of scavengers.

Ostracism and social ridicule

There is ample evidence of the social ridicule and abuse directed at those who perform manual scavenging. In Kerala, decades ago, Bhangis (known as Pulayas and Parayas locally) were not allowed to walk on the streets without an identifying mark. They had to tie a broom behind them to sweep away the imprints of their polluting feet and hang a mud pot under their chin to spit into, so that their spit would not pollute the ground. In Marwar (present day Rajasthan), they had to call out 'Payse!' (keep distance) and wear a crow's feather on their turban. Social ostracism has persisted in many forms as this current research shows (see Box 1).

Apart from physical isolation and social and moral abuse, there was also significant economic disparity between the Bhangis and other groups, legitimized by the Hindu religion. Hindu sacred law or dharma forbade some castes (and women) from acquiring wealth and property. Both men and women were engaged in scavenging, however Bhangi women formed the great majority of individual household dry latrine cleaners, servicing the toilets of the female social elite.

Gender disparity amongst the community of cleaners is as prevalent

Box 1. Social ostracism

'The work is done in the dark; everybody shits, but who wants to see and smell it? So we work at night.' What do they think of a system that allows one human to clean another's excreta? They are bitter: 'We soil ourselves, so that the others can look clean'.

They complain that shopkeepers will not take money from their hands: the money is put on a counter, water is sprinkled on it and then it will be handled. Most members of the community are in the cleaning profession, cleaning latrines in public places like the bus stands, railway stations, hospitals and nursing homes; cleaning up excreta, urine, blood and wastes.

as it is in any other occupation. Women by and large are the ones who manually clean the toilets and heap the faeces outside the toilet (see Box 2). The men haul this away, either on a tractor or a handcart or rickshaw to dump it in fields outside the town. Salaries are higher for men and men have had better access to rehabilitation. Male scavengers have found it easier to shift professions because they have had better access to alternative livelihoods and their physical mobility is unhampered by the demands of childcare and other household responsibilities.

Government rehabilitation

Government schemes for rehabilitation have been extremely short-sighted. Lacking any sensitivity to the need for moral, economic and social rehabilitation, the programme announces buffalo-rearing, material shops, petty trading, vegetable selling, auto-driving as potential livelihoods for traditional scavengers. The programme process itself was fraught with problems; there is significant resistance from the banks to lend money to ex-scavengers – identified traditionally and by religious doctrines as 'not capable of property ownership and enterprise'. The identification of beneficiaries was equally flawed, the elderly, non-literate and women, essentially the ones needing rehabilitation most, were less 'eligible' for this programme. Some were too old to cope with this economic rehabilita-

Box 2. A scavenger speaks

'Despite the fact that I cleaned toilets day after day, all my hairs stand erect when I think of it. Every morning, we left home around 6 a.m., on an empty stomach and filled bucket after bucket of stinking faeces. Each time, the load filled, we would take the buckets to the designated dumping grounds. Where there were no open disposal sites, the faeces would be heaped in designated areas and would be carted away in bullock carts by Madiga men. In most places, water taps were provided for cleaning the bucket, the broom and the tin plates. When we cleaned these, the faeces would stick to our clothes and our bodies. This could be cleaned only after we reached home. We had two sets of clothes, one to wear while cleaning the faeces and one for use at home; we never mixed these up. When we reached home in the late afternoon, we would ask one of the elder children or our husbands to heat some water to have a bath. We would also wash our clothes and hang them to dry for use the next day. This was our routine day after day, year after year. The stench would stay in our minds and bodies and while the men often got rid of this by drinking alcohol, this was not really possible for women. It was painful to eat the one meal in the evening. Men, especially those who were not doing this work, but who were cleaning drains and sweeping streets, often drank tea and ate snacks when they could afford it but we women did the whole day's work on an empty stomach.'

Chandro, a 65-year old woman from Hyderabad



Women generally are the ones who manually clean the toilets and heap the faeces outside the toilet

tion; others couldn't cope with the application procedures – especially since education, too, has been long denied to this social group, especially to its women. As seen in Metharwadi, Hyderabad, the whole rehabilitation process has spawned an ugly divide within the community, with a few 'better-off' Methar households becoming unofficial, illegal brokers in the rehabilitation process.

'We have got so many forms filled for us, and gone so many times to different people, but nothing works. Can you help my son find a job?' asked Chandro, a frail and ailing 60 year-old ex-scavenger. 'They [the 'brokering' Methar family] do not help, the money we are asked to secure a job, a loan, is beyond our reach.'

It is such desperation and lack of realistic opportunities that makes some people assert that they do not want to change their age-old profession. The Methars in Metharwadi have conflicting views on the termination of dry latrine scavenging in Hyderabad. The burden of handling human faeces daily is a heavy one, yet they sense a loss of their place in a changing society with the termination of this age-old, socially defined occupation (see Box 3).

As households personally or through subsidies, upgrade their dry latrines to pour-flush ones, the absolute necessity for a scavenger decreases. Scavengers were linked to their cleaning households through strong inter-generational links. Scavenging rights to serviced households passed from father to son, or mostly mother-in-law to daughter-in-law through a process known as 'badili'. Keeping with this traditional practice, some scavengers continue to clean pour-flush latrines, with little change of payment. But, this patronage practice is steadily declining.

Bhangi responses

It is obvious that there is neither much awareness of, nor faith in, the government's narrowly conceived rehabilitation schemes. In their absence, some scavengers capitalize on their 'irreparable' polluted identity.

The narrow lanes of Metharwadi are filled with temples or rather clinics of Methar faith healers promising to cure diseases, find employment, destroy

Box 3. Losing employment

'We are losing our employment. The government uses the TV and radio to tell people that they don't need to employ us any more'. (This is in specific reference to a recent Harpic toilet cleaner advertisement which states that one can easily clean one's own toilets.) 'If we presume this is to our benefit, then we need to adopt other occupations. What will we become – barbers, washermen? – and will those traditionally engaged in this work allow us this change?'

One man claims that in the old days, 'If we didn't go to work for two or three days, there would be people calling at our doors. When we went in the early morning, with a broom and a bucket, the men folk of the houses would be standing there with an oil lamp and calling, "Please Methar, come and clean our toilets." Some would literally plead with us. They had no choice. If we didn't clean, they could not defecate. Nowadays, they tell us that we are no longer needed. Of the 40 households my wife and I serviced, the number has decreased now to 15 or 16'.

enemies, find love – the wish list is as long as one desires. Long queues of Hindu and Muslim clients say that Methars, who were earlier known only to cure snake bites and other poisonous infestations, may now be able to heal a wider range of illnesses. They suggest that healing power is based on a potent combination of an entrenched polluted identity, who can touch, absorb and scour evil, and the invocation of favours from gods, goddesses, and spirits who are feared and not approached by most others.

One organization, headed by an ex-scavenger that is actively campaigning is the Safai Karmachari Association in Andhra Pradesh. The SKA's position is uncompromising – they demand the total abolition of manual scavenging. Trade unions and even Dalit groups have demanded that the SKA organize manual scavengers into a union to demand better wages and living conditions but their leader, Wilson, argues against this, saying that 'we can only be powerful when there are no

more among us, who remain manual scavengers'. He explains that the problems of alcoholism, poverty, unemployment and illiteracy are the by-products of this age-old imposition of cleaning up other people's excreta. He also argues that, 'abolition has to be done primarily by groups of manual scavengers themselves in the face of an exposed lack of political will by the government and shameless apathy by the so-called civil society.'

Manual scavengers seem to be caught in a vicious circle. A historically assigned occupation continues due to the demand for the services and the social and economic constraints on their own upward mobility. Scavengers are well aware that they are *tolerated* in the larger Hindu community only if they internalize the ethos of scavenging. While supporting the campaign, there is still fear of being publicly vocal.

This also relates to the fact that SKA volunteers were threatened with jail sentences when they voluntarily demolished functional dry latrines across the state, structures long defined as 'illegal' by constitutional decree.

The elderly are stoic in accepting the occupation: 'It is our job to lift dead animals, to clean faeces, to clean gutters and drains. We have to do it because we are Bhangis'. This entrenched attitude is echoed all too clearly, in the justification by the upper castes: 'Shepherd, bhangi, carpenter, each one does what's assigned to him. Each one is *proud* of their own status' (ibid). This attitude was also reflected in the views of Gandhi: 'The Bhangi (Methar) does for society what a mother does for her child – washes off the dirt and ensures his health... I term them as Harijan – the children of God' (Gandhi).



Methars, employed by the Municipal Corporation, still do not have adequate safety equipment.

New cleaning jobs

Growth and expansion of the city opened new opportunities for Methars, but the tasks remain the same. Methars now clean up and dispose of faeces, human and other wastes in hospitals; they clean toilets in official institutions, hotels, cinemas, schools, factories and shopping malls.

The reality is that even if all dry latrines were demolished, the task of scavenging and cleaning filth continues to be the occupation of Valmikis, who fill the ranks of the lowest order 'cleaning' employees in private and official sanitation institutions.

Workers in the Sultan Shahi office of the Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sanitation Board broke into raucous laughter, when the researcher listed the safety equipment supposed to be provided to them, as mentioned to her by the senior Board officials (gas mask, oxygen breathing apparatus, portable air blowers, safety belts, inhalators, gum boots, driver's suits and rubber gloves).

'Permanent workers get a petty allowance to buy soap and oil (to rub on the body before immersing in the drains). Temporary workers buy these with their own money. Privatization involves contracting out cleaning work – thus all contract workers are temporary. Sewerage workers dying from health hazards outnumber those who die from old age. In 2004, 10 permanent and 3 temporary workers died during work.'

Compared to official permanent work, temporary and private employment offers low salaries, no job security, benefits or welfare. In fact, Methars continue to service and clean toilets – in poorly paid, temporary, no-benefits

jobs in the much-acclaimed Gandhian social rehabilitation initiative, 'Sulabh Shouchalaya' (sanitary toilets), now known as 'Sulabh International'.

Better investment and planning in sanitation services and better working conditions for those engaged in this occupation hold the promise of some reform but not social rehabilitation. But, sanitation is not high in the priorities of politicians or the administration. Public health officials estimate sanitary coverage at less than 30 per cent for Andhra Pradesh. Municipalities can raise 90 per cent loans under the Integrated Low Cost Sanitation Programme, but this does not often happen and water supply, not sanitation, is still the main vote winner.

For the majority of scavengers in smaller towns and villages nothing much has changed despite the passage of time and the growing demand for pour-flush latrines. On the one hand, in the absence of any meaningful rehabilitation, there is a growing feeling of redundancy and insecurity. On the other hand, they continue to clean drains, *nalas*, sewers, septic latrines and pit latrines working as municipal or private sweepers and cleaners for little remuneration and without adequate protection.

In earlier times, they used their own tins, brooms and buckets to clean dry latrines, now they are officially provided some tools, but manual contact with faeces and the social ostracization has not ended.

In larger towns and cities the practice of dry latrine scavenging has stopped, partly due to legislation, but mostly due to the shift in attitudes and beliefs that toilets are a luxury, rather than polluting entities.

The caste stigma persists even for those who have moved away completely from scavenging.

Arvind Bidla, a young man of around 30 says, 'I'm dressed like you, have completed my undergraduate education, have a non-cleaning job and am also a local politician. I move around with upper-caste Hindu leaders and they seem to accept me as one of them. But I know that when I turn away to go, they will say, "that Methar". My caste identity will not leave me easily.'

The fight against scavenging will only be won when there is a massive change in attitude both amongst the oppressed and the oppressors. Innovative planning and compensation that considers all the social, political and economic aspects of rehabilitation is required to erase centuries of degradation of a society and its people.² In more practical terms, a life of dignity for those involved in scavenging can only come about when the occupation is adopted by choice, open to all, offering benefits which enable a safe, secure and dignified livelihood.

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