

Manual Scavengers and Their Health

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Introduction:

The greatest scourge of untouchability is felt by manual scavengers whose daily living based on cleaning faeces from public and private latrines and dispose of dead animals from the village setup. Deemed to polluting and filthy occupation, this job is preformed exclusively by Dalits, and that too, to a sub-caste of Dalits who are considered even by other Dalits sub-castes to be wretched and 'untouchable.'

Manual Scavenging is not only a violation of human rights but also a disgrace to human dignity and humanity at large. This situation persists despite the fact that the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, is in enforcement, which provides for the prohibition of the employment of manual

scavengers as well as construction or continuance of dry latrines and for the regulation of construction and maintenance of water-seal latrines for assuring the dignity of the individual, as enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution.

Manual scavenging continues to exist in India, despite being unacceptable and hazardous as a method of disposal of human waste, despite scientific and technological advancement on various fronts that saves manual labour, and despite the availability of simple and low-cost alternatives which can eradicate the twin problems of manual scavenging and safe disposal of human excreta. It passes on from generation to generation. Culture of acceptance prevailing among them is also depriving them of their basic rights

Importantly, Governmental rehabilitation programmes are mainly failed due to lack of reliable number of manual scavengers and provision of meager financial support. It is estimation based upon the Census 2011 data that approximately 1.2 Million manual scavengers are till date involved in manual scavenging practice. Government of India has fixed a time limit to end this inhuman practice since it was outlawed. However the deadline has been continuously extended by the Central Government.

At the same time, the National Advisory Council adopted a number of recommendations for the elimination of scavenging, while the Union Government on 27 August 2012 had cleared the Prohibition of Employment of Manual scavenger and their rehabilitation Bill, 2012. In addition, Government has expressed speedy

elimination of scavenging practice in the 12th five year approach paper.

Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan's approach:

Manual Scavenging is primarily a Socio – Political issue, it denies life with dignity. This is one prime reason why every attempt to address it through livelihood aspect never succeeded in eradicating it. The occupation of Manual Scavenging has its roots in the caste system, which renders the community invisible and powerless. Further, condition and status of women pitches this issue into the premise of gender and women rights. They are not only forced into the occupation, but also face multiple situations of vulnerabilities and denial of rights & justice within all spheres of life. Thus this unfortunate dalit community faces the dual challenge of ‘Liberation’ and “Rehabilitation” - Liberation from the inhumane occupation and invisibility to lead a life with ‘dignity’ and rehabilitation in the comprehensive terms encompassing social, religious, economic & political aspects.



This is the concern with the prevailing situation says that “this is entirely a question of self-esteem and dignity; and no financial assistance/ help or government schemes can search an answer to this question. There is an urge to make sincere efforts from both sides; firstly this vulnerable community should stop doing this work and secondly, the society should accept this vulnerable community by giving them equal status without any discretion.

Manual scavengers and health related issues:

Life of Manual Scavenger is at risk at every stage, looking in health related issue will make it draw clearer picture of the problem. The working conditions of these sanitary workers have remained virtually unchanged for over a century. Apart from the social atrocities that these workers face, they are exposed to certain health problems by virtue of their occupation. These health hazards include exposure to harmful gases such as methane and hydrogen sulfide, cardiovascular degeneration, musculoskeletal disorders like osteoarthritic changes and intervertebral disc herniation, infections like hepatitis, leptospirosis and helicobacter, skin problems, respiratory system problems and altered pulmonary function parameters.

Women manual scavengers:

Women working unprotected are in grave danger of contacting countless diseases through their daily and close contact with human waste. Some of these diseases, in addition to TB, include: campylobacter infection, cryptosporidiosis, giardiasis, hand, foot and mouth disease, hepatitis A,

meningitis (viral), rotavirus infection, salmonella infection, shigella infection, thrush, viral gastroenteritis, worms and yersiniosis. Facing the dangers of daily contact, “Ninety percent of all manual scavengers have not been provided proper equipment to protect them from faeces borne illness,” said a report (Jan 2007) on safety by India’s TISS – Tata Institute of Social Sciences. This includes safety equipment like gloves, masks, boots and/or brooms. The use of hands by women manual scavengers, along with the certainty that they will have direct skin contact with human waste, is a very dangerous combination that is contributing to serious health conditions. Chronic skin diseases and lung diseases are very common among women manual scavengers.

Sewage and manhole /sanitation workers

Most of the Municipalities in India are not equipped with the latest machines to clean the sewage system and therefore, sewage workers employed under compulsion to enter the underground sewerage lines through the manholes and cleanse them wherever the lines are clogged for whatever reason. The job of the sewer worker is to inspect and maintain the underground network pipes that make up sewerage system. Sewage workers have to remove solid substance wastes which responsible for blockage of flow of fluid waste in sewage system. For that sewage workers regularly entered into manholes which contain very poisonous gases.

The working conditions of sewage workers are very dangerous; they are provided with a

rope and bucket to clean the manhole manually. While working this, they have to face various poisonous gases which are harmful for their health and sometime it causes their life. . Due to that, Sewage workers usually have had cuts, injuries, irritation of eyes and suffered from skin rash and related health problems. The existing protective equipments are neither adequate nor up to the standard quality. Also, most of the sewage workers are not educated to use protective equipment’s. Most of sewage workers are recruited on contract basis and on daily wages. A large number of sewer workers die before retirement. While working on busy road area, there is always feared of accidents from moving vehicles.

Manual Scavenger in Indian Railways

Institutions like the Indian Railways, the Municipal corporations and Gram Panchayats employ manual scavengers on contract bases. The Indian Railways is the major employer of manual scavengers, and manages some of the longest rows of open latrines in the world. The open-hole lavatories in every railway compartment/coach that is in service in the country turns the largest rail network of the world into big lavatory that drops raw human excreta and other waste on rail track and over people and vehicles- where the rail line runs above roads. It is a common scene in every railway station in the country, railway employees cleaning with a broom, railway sleepers coaches covered with human excreta waiting to be cleaned. Indian railways run one of the most complex rail networks in the world. It manages a network of over 63000 route km with over 13 lakh

employees. Approximately 13000 train runs daily out of which 9000 are passenger trains and 13 million passengers travelling every day. As per Nanda report, the railway department has cited several reasons for the delay in improving toilet facility, including prohibitive costs, with one estimate pegging the amount required for bio-toilets at Rs. 1,600 crore. With the Indian railways running a total of 50,000 coaches on date, of which 43,000 coaches are engaged in the passengers service, this means that there are total of 1, 72,000 toilets which are functioning today using no modern technology but improper mode of service which requires the use of manual scavengers to clean the human excreta which is directly discharged on to the railway track.

Reasons of continuation of the manual scavenging and failure of act, government policy and programmes

- An important reason for the failure of government rehabilitation programmes since 'Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (prohibition) Act, 1993', came into force, is that, rehabilitation schemes and programme has been aiming at male worker rather than their Female worker who make upto 98 per cent of the people held captive by the oppressive tradition of manual scavenging.
- An example of a particularly self-defeating government programme is a scholarship for the children of the victims, (Scholarship for the Children of Families involved in incline occupation) which require the families seeking the

benefit to have been engaged in manual scavenging for at least 100 days in a year. This scholarship scheme provides a perverse incentive to the Dalit households to continue in this occupation.

- Government programmes have emphasized the financial aspect of rehabilitation and failed to address the caste-based oppression and related social conditions that have perpetuated this practice for centuries.
- Government programmes have completely ignored the Muslim communities, such as Hela and Halalkhor, who inhabit in several states of India and have been as much a slave of this exploitative tradition as the Dalit Hindu communities. It's notable that the actual victims in this case too are primarily women.
- Several states have refused to implement the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (prohibition) Act, 1993, by denying the existence of dry latrines and manual scavenging in their jurisdictions despite evidence to the contrary. In other states, implementation has suffered because the Act itself is deficient on several counts; it neither lays down clearly the areas of responsibility nor provides penalties for non-enforcement of the law.
- No national or state-level body exists that will monitor the implementation of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (prohibition) Act, 1993. The Safai

Karmachari commissions that exist at the centre and at some states do not play their role effectively either.

- There are other laws – namely, Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (prevention of atrocities) Act, 1989, Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955, and Bonded Labour System (abolition) Act, 1976 – are completely ignored and stand violated because of the continued practice of manual scavenging. People have rarely been booked under sections of these Acts for harbouring the practice of manual scavenging even when such violations have been brought to the notice of the administration.
- The government needs to realize that loan and subsidy make for only an apology for rehabilitation. The people enslaved by this inhuman tradition over many generations can hardly be expected to transform their lives with the paltry sum of money they receive in the form of loan and subsidy, especially when they continue to be discriminated against. These oppressed families deserve larger financial assistance in the form of grants, rather than loans, such as inclusion in the BPL list and related various benefits thereof, housing under Indira Awas Yojana, etc.
- There have been serious mistakes and errors in the surveys that seek to identify and rehabilitate the victims. The most glaring distortion of the reality is that more men have been shown to be the victims of manual scavenging than

women. The surveys also leave out a large number of deserving people from the list of potential beneficiaries while including people who and their families have no longer anything to do with manual scavenging. The surveys have also been biased in favour of urban areas, leaving out large swaths of the rural population.

Thus, to summarize, the Scavenger and sewage workers suffer mainly from chemical and biological hazards. This can be prevented through engineering, medical and legislative measures. The engineering measure should focus on making the process more mechanistic. These workers should also be benefited from occupational health services, which should include pre-placement and periodic health monitoring. Further effective implementation of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, will help in the abolition of manual scavenging. Also, regular awareness programs should be conducted to impart education regarding safer work procedures and use of personal protective devices.