

Why did Satyam die?

-Mithun Som¹

Satyam, a 43-year old worker died while cleaning one of the manholes in Serilingampally (Circle 11), which comes under Greater Hyderabad Municipal Corporation (GHMC) on May 11, 2013. This particular manhole was one of the few manholes in this circle which has a depth of about 30 ft. The normal manholes are 3-5 ft in depth. His daughter, who also works with him, was present near the opening when he entered to clean the manhole. She saw Satyam going down using the steps and was just a few feet away from the bottom when, probably weakened by the lack of oxygen and presence of poisonous gases, he could not grasp the stairs with his hand. He fell. The daughter called for help and a passerby, Anjaneyulu, age 18 years, went inside the manhole to help Satyam. Both died.

What do the GHMC Management and Union Say?

The management says that they do not know why Satyam went in to clean the manhole as they had not instructed him to do so. Even though there have been complaints for two months regarding this manhole, it could not be cleaned as the machines available with GHMC was not able to clean this 30 ft manhole. The executive engineer claimed that he had visited that manhole, declared it dangerous and had clarified that it was only to be cleaned by the machines they were planning to get from Water Supply and Sewerage Board Department. The management says there were clear instructions given to the supervisor and the workers not to try cleaning the manhole even if there is pressure from the people. Satyam had cleaned another two

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manholes the same morning before going into this one. The supervisor denies having given any instructions. The Union (general secretary, Babji) agrees with the management saying he does not know why Satyam went to clean the manhole even when there was clear instruction not to clean it. He further says that Satyam ought to have known how dangerous this manhole was by looking at it, even if no one has told him so. The health officer, who is the officer in charge, said that this was an off day as it was second Saturday and also the work was done after 11 am, generally by which time the workers have done their drainage work. In other words, Satyam was supposed to be off duty at that time.

What Does the Family Say?

The family clarified that they do not get any leave, no weekly off and no holidays. They are supposed to work on all the days in a month. The shift timing for Satyam was 4.00 am to 2.00 pm, so the question of his being off duty on that particular day does not arise at all. He told his daughter who was with him when he went in to the manhole that 'Sir' has asked him to clean it. She could not identify which 'Sir' but she was confident that he was working under instructions. He did not know the depth of the manhole and was unaware of the dangers. The family feels that if the group leader had been there she would have warned him and would have told him about the danger and his death could have been prevented. The workers have their own techniques of minimizing some dangers like this, e.g., they open the adjacent manholes when cleaning a particular one as this releases the fumes and lessens the toxicity in the manhole which needs to be cleaned. On this day his partner was not there, he was working alone and so this process was not followed.

What Makes a Worker Get into this Kind of Work?

This section explores as to who are these people who get into this kind of work of cleaning manholes which no one would take up by choice.

Caste

The workers cleaning the manholes are from backward castes, Dalit s and tribals. There are no general category workers. On a rough estimate, about 80% of the GHMC workers including workers for cleaning and sweeping are of Madiga caste (SC). Others are mostly SCs, with 1-2% OBC (Mudiraj, Chakali, Yadav) and a negligible number of members of the ST. This is a job open to all yet it is predominantly taken up by the lower castes throughout India. There have also been cases of upper castes holding on the job and subcontracting the job to the lower caste (Tripathi, 2012). As this work is considered dirty and polluting, a person will chose it when no other opportunity is available. A majority of these workers in Hyderabad are from Madiga caste (SC). The Madiga and other castes in India like Valmiki, Bhangi, etc., have been associated with this work “traditionally” and they have moved only from manual scavenging to manhole cleaning. Once a worker or community is associated with this kind of work, it is a like a trap, he would get the same kind of work but find it difficult to get other kinds of work. Thus it is important to see the manhole workers not as a professional class but rather as a caste group. Satyam however belonged to the Mudiraj community (BC) who traditionally do not do this kind of work.

So what forced him to take up a work which is below his “caste profession”.

Livelihood and Debt

The Mudiraj is primarily a non-agricultural BC community. They do seasonal gathering (fruit and forest produce), fishing and farm labour. Traditionally one family from this community in a village function as “*muskoor*” that is peons or couriers between the village authority and the residents. Satyam belonged to Mahbubnagar district. With the general desertification of the environment in Mahbubnagar, the Mudiraj community lost its livelihood and agriculture labour also became scarce. The added issue here is that the politics of irrigation and dams in the past fifty years has accelerated the desertification of Mahbubnagar (Satyam’s district) and benefiting Guntur district. Thus most forms of traditional occupation for Satyam’s community had dwindled. So have many other traditional occupations like pottery, basket weaving, mat making etc., over the years with the advent of modernization.

The low public spending in agriculture, changes in farming technology, resulting in high input cost and unavailability of credit at reasonable rates, is making it difficult for the marginal farmers and farm labourers to sustain themselves (Reddy, 2009). The situation is worse in Andhra Pradesh with systematic cuts in agricultural and allied activities budget (Reddy, 2006). The NSS figures show there is an increasing trend towards the more insecure casual labour rather than self employment or regular employment in rural labour (Chowdhury, 2011). Casual labour is at its highest for rural male since 1970s (Chowdhury, 2011).

Mahbubnagar district is considered the hub of migration, the migrants renowned as “Palamur labours”. Satyam was from Achampet Mandal of this district. This district has a history of drought especially seen in last few decades, and the net sown area has decreased in the last couple of decades and all these factors combined provides cheap migrant labour (Olsen, Ramana Murthy, 2000). Some people migrate by themselves and others are brought by middlemen or

contractors (*maistries*) to the city. Satyam's family, consisting of his wife, four daughters and one son did not have any land. They survived working as farm labourers. However, with the poor state of agriculture, and the seasonality and insecurity of the work, they found it difficult and therefore decided to move to the city.

Debt in many poor households is another major reason which leads to migration as migration becomes a defensive coping strategy. Debts incurred due to marriage, death, ill-health, bad agricultural season, or any other catastrophic expenditure pushes the people out to the urban areas. Debts from formal sources in rural areas have declined after 1992 and the debt from formal sources as percentage of total debt have seen more decline in Dalit households (16% from 1992 to 2002) as compared to non Dalit households (5% from 1992 to 2002) (Chavan, 2012). By 2002, moneylenders replaced commercial banks as the largest source of debt for Dalit households. And the share of debt taken at an interest rate of above 20% saw an increase for the same period (Chavan, 2012). Andhra Pradesh has the highest indebtedness in farmer household (82%) and the institutional sources in the state account for the lowest (30%) percent of loans in the country (Reddy, 2006).

Satyam had also incurred a debt on account of his elder daughter's marriage. It seems that the Mudiraj community did not have the dowry system earlier but now for the elder daughter's wedding, Satyam had given one lakh rupees in cash and five tolas of gold. There is an increasing trend of dowry in the lower castes which can be attributed to a complex set of factors which merit a separate investigation. He had three more daughters to marry off and with every daughter he would have to take a loan to pay for the dowry. A study in rural Tamil Nadu shows that "low caste, landless households and labourers more often borrow to cover daily survival costs and

ceremonies, while middle castes, landowners and producers more often borrow for economic investment” (Guerin et al, 2011).

Education

People from the lower castes face double hardship due to their caste status and poverty, especially in rural areas. The children often have to help their parents due to which they are not able to continue their education provided of course the schools are accessible to them. Many have never attended schools. When they come to the city, these people with little or no education are left to work in the informal, unorganized sectors in low paying jobs, barely able to sustain, which makes them again economically vulnerable. Thus the next generation is no way better off and the cycle continues unless someone is able to escape (Singla, 2013). Satyam had studied till class four and was able to read, his elder three daughters have dropped out in class tenth, ninth and fourth respectively, his fourth daughter in class 7th and his son in class 4th are the only ones continuing their studies.

Limited Choice after Migration to City

When people come to the city in search of work, with almost no education, with no capital, and skills not suited to urban labour, they have very limited scope of work. As in Satyam’s case, the family had a choice of entering into construction work or be a part of the self help group (SHG) and work in GHMC. But with Satyam’s wife’s poor health condition, she would not have been able to take the heavy load and strenuous work in a construction site. Satyam’s individual income would not have been enough for the family to survive. In GHMC they had a chance where three members of the family could work and so they opted for this work and later on stuck on to this work. Most workers migrate by chain migration (Banerjee, 1983) where migrants come to the city and then other migrants from their village or community mostly follow to the same

kind of jobs. Thus a lower caste worker in informal work will introduce his/her kin to do the same kind of work. When SHGs become the medium of employment like in GHMC, then it becomes another facilitator for migration. And since it is generally seen that the same or equal caste people form a group, this facilitates their entering into same occupations.

For the first two months after joining the GHMC, Satyam used to clean roads and it was only after two months that he was instructed to clean manholes. At that time, Satyam did not have an option; he had to take it up or else risk losing his job. His youngest daughter said, *“if we don't do it when we are told we will lose the job”*.

This shows the desperate need of the family and is a particularly severe blow to a non-Dalit caste. The politicization of the Dalit caste permits them to take these jobs with an understanding of caste politics involved, and in any case their doing these jobs is public knowledge. For these reasons, they do not face isolation. Being an OBC, lacking the necessary politicization and facing stigmatization due to doing work below their caste, it is not surprising that people like Satyam would quietly accept these jobs without complaint and in addition keep it secret. This leads to isolation from the larger community they belong to (G Shyamala in personal discussions).

Work Conditions

Weekly offs: Officially they are a seven member group and everyday one member takes leave. This would be based on their internal arrangement and six members would be working on any given day. Satyam's family said that they have to work on all the days in a month without a single leave. In case they take any leave, Rs.230 per day is deducted from their pay. These are flagrant violations of labour laws, yet the family reported that this has been going on. This

reduces the workers as daily wagers, the only difference being they do not have to look for work every day.

Shifts: For drainage cleaning, they work in the first shift from 4.00 am. Some three groups on an average have a common sanitary field assistant (or supervisor) who has the muster roll, who marks their attendance, assigns them work and also oversees their work. The workers need to have a good relation with the supervisor as he marks their attendance according to which they get their pay.

Pay: About a year back the money was given in the name of the group and the group leader withdrew the money and gave it to the workers. But now GHMC pays the workers by direct transfers into their accounts and even now, the group leader like in Satyam's group helps them in withdrawing the money from the bank. The workers do not receive money on any fixed day or at the beginning of the month. For example, Satyam's wife's Narramma's account from 2011 showed that she has been receiving money in her account on different dates and even at the fag end of the month. It was only after November 12, that they have got money within the first 10 days of the month. The period before one year was even worse as she invariably got her money almost at the end of the month. This is because the system of calculating salary based on attendance and verifying it is a complicated process which passes from head office, a contract agency, zonal office, audit and finally bank. The amount has also varied from Rs.3500 (till May 2012) to Rs.5540 being the maximum.

The Union General Secretary (Babji) said the workers do not get enough money to support the family. They have to manage the entire family's expenses and that includes rent, food, clothing, health and education for their children with what they get. Another Union official, also said that the single worker's salary is certainly not enough to cover the family's expenses. The Union

person also adds that these workers, many times cannot send their children to school and the children also have to work to support the family. Children in many households earn about 1000-2000 Rs in some other jobs to help the family.

Contract Status: The earlier system had 18 workers who formed a unit under the contractor, but there were reports of widespread corruption by the contractors. So the contractor system has been replaced by the seven member sanitary workers group for the sweepers. This is technically different from the Self Help Group which requires a minimum of ten members. The drainage workers are all part of these groups in the peripheral circles, which includes Serilingampally circle where Satyam worked. In the main city area, the sweeping and drainage groups are different. In these areas, the drainage groups are still under contractor and come under Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (HMWSSB).

The drainage workers in the peripheral circles of the city do not fall under the permanent employees nor are they under any contractor. They are part of groups registered with GHMC which puts them in a unique position. They are better off than contract labourers. The informal group leader is the link who negotiates between the management and the members. There would be a general tendency for the leader to move closer to the management rather than the group members and perhaps in the long run she becomes more of a “middleman”. So on the face of it, the group may look democratic and group together capable of taking care of its members but the reality could be quite different. This would be more so in groups where there is marked difference between the literacy and numeracy skills of the leader and other members.

These workers do not get anything like a paper contract or appointment letter. Since they do not have a paper contract, there is no proof of prior work experience on the basis of which they can

command better pay or other advantages. This handicap remains even though they are not contract workers in strict sense.

Drinking and Work: One of the points raised by the health officer and also surprisingly the Union was that Satyam was drunk on that day. Satyam's family said that he used to drink only during the night after work. We do not know what the autopsy has revealed. But even if we accept that he was drunk, we need to question why do workers like him drink while on work. Is it the nature of the work that they do, a work which no one would like, but they have to do to earn a living? Getting into a manhole blocked and overflowing with stinking feces and rotting refuse would need one to numb his senses to deal with the experience. Drinking helps them to deal with both the experience and the physical labour.

Why Does a Manhole Need Cleaning by the Workers?

With so much progress in technology in today's world, why does a human being still need to go down in the manhole, totally unequipped, without any safety gear, to clean it? Why is the state not investing money in technology and rather leaving it to the workers to enter in the manholes to clean it, when the task is such a basic necessity of urban life. The only answer that suggests itself is that there is a lack of will to do it, to think with humanity about the workers who are cleaning the manholes, and without whom the health and sanitation of the whole city will collapse. Even though some high courts like the Gujarat high court has banned manual cleaning of manholes, there are instances of manual cleaning of manholes even there (*Indian Express*, 2009). There is also a danger that total ban of entering manholes may lead to the continuance of the work but in more difficult circumstances, in a more invisible way.

Even now, all the circles do not have the machines. Yadaiah says that of the total budget of Rs 3,800 crores of GHMC, they surely can budget for the machines. The circle where Satyam was

working (as neighboring two circles) does not have their own Airtech machine for cleaning manholes. So the three circles have to depend on circle 14, Kukatpally for the machines. In the present arrangement, this circle gets the machine once a week on a Wednesday. This particular manhole where Satyam died had a complaint since the last two months. The GHMC attended to it, bought machines from neighbouring circle and tried resolving it but after few days, the drainage would again get blocked. They were trying to get a more powerful machine from the HMWSSB department.

In most developed countries, the workers who enter the manholes are equipped with protective clothing, respiratory apparatus, safety harness, manhole mechanically aerated with huge fans, the atmosphere of the manhole tested at three different levels for oxygen, explosive gases and hydrogen sulphide and a person is always outside the manhole when someone goes in.

Here, when a person is going inside the manhole, there is no effort or equipment to assess the level of poisonous gas inside the manhole. These are simple techniques which can easily be developed at very low cost. (Interestingly, in rural areas, when a person needs to enter a deep well for further digging, they have their own indigenous technique to assess the level of danger. For example they send a live hen or a burning lamp inside the well to assess the level of oxygen. If the hen dies or the lamp goes out, the area lacks oxygen. (*Andhra Jyoti*, July 9, 2013, article by Jeevan Kumar). The workers develop their own small prevention measures like keeping the cover open for some time, opening the adjacent manhole covers, burning a candle to assess the oxygen content etc. But these are not full proof measures of security. The state or the municipality does not provide any protective or security measures.

The health officer of Serilingampally circle says that safety gear is provided by GHMC like hand gloves, leather boots, masks to the garbage collector and drainage cleaners. For the permanent

employees, the GHMC provides clothes, chappals, soap, oil, etc. There certainly seem to be divergent accounts because two of the supervisors from the same circle said that no masks are provided to the sweepers nor any safety gear provided to the drainage cleaners. Satyam's family said that they have never received any kind of safety gear.

This can only happen when the workers are considered dispensable. There are scores of people waiting to take up this work who are in a similar situation of desperation and would not consider the dangers because their primary need is the money for survival. In failing these workers, the state is abandoning its responsibility for their life and safety.

Health, Accidents and Deaths

A number of toxic and non-toxic gases are present at varying levels in the manholes depending on the source. The most common and hazardous gases are hydrogen sulphide, methane and carbon monoxide. In addition, oxygen deficiency is another major cause of illness and fatalities. Hydrogen sulphide has a rotten smell but at levels over 100ppm, it has paralyzing effect on the sense of smell (OSHB, 2007). So it is very dangerous to rely on smell for the presence of this gas. All of these gases in a higher concentration has a paralyzing effect and causes immediate death. A study done by Centre for Education and Communication on the Health and Safety Status of Sewage Workers in Delhi has shown that the majority of workers have had eye irritation, skin rash and cuts. More than 50% of the pulmonary test results were abnormal. None of the workers have been formally instructed about the hazards in their workplace. There have been different estimates of deaths of manhole workers across the country. Data obtained from Mumbai under RTI shows that 2039 Safai Karmacharis between 1996 to 2006 have died in 14 of the 24 wards of the city. Another estimate shows at least 22,327 Dalits die every year cleaning

sewage (Anand, 2007). In GHMC, the Union leader said that there have been at least 20 deaths in Under Ground Drainage (UGD).

Yadaiah said that the contract workers (in some circles) do not get coverage as their contractors do not pay their share to the ESI. Other workers who form self-help groups like Satyam have ESI coverage and their contribution is cut from their salary. But the Union leader in the head office insists that many of the workers do not get the cards and many are still not aware about the services that they are supposed to get. Satyam's family has never used the ESI card. They had a temporary card that was valid only till October 2011. They never got a new card and never bothered. After hearing about the negative experiences of others accessing ESI, they never gave it a try. In addition, for going to ESI OPD, they do not get any leave and are asked to go after their work gets over in the afternoon. So they instead go to the private provider in their area who charges them 100-150 rupees for a visit. In these circumstances a worker would not access health services unless and until they are incapable of doing their work, thereby ignoring their health till it becomes a crisis. The situation will be even worse for the women in the family. A study of Sanitation workers in Ahmedabad shows that about 25% of the income is spent on medical expenses (Mishra et al, 2012). Satyam's family has not got any compensation due to his death from ESI either.

Whose Responsibility is Satyam's Death Ultimately?

There is no separate law to protect the health and safety of these workers, even though they have a very high morbidity and mortality rate. Even though there are so many accidents and deaths, there is no official mechanism by which they are compensated. Every time the Union has to fight for it and only then the GHMC compensates. Here the money looks like more of a charity and

not as a right of the worker's family who have lost their earning member due to lack of adequate precautions by the GHMC.

It is the government's responsibility to clean the manholes using machines. By bringing in first the contract system and next this new system of self help groups, the Government is distancing itself from the workers and their welfare. Where use of machines should have been a priority instead of workers cleaning the manholes, presently four circles are sharing one machine to do what the workers cannot do, and with fatal results. The compensation is also not seen even by the Union as the right of the worker, but rather something that needs to be fought for.

This is not an individual case of accident as the management is trying to portray. Rather this comes across as a worker who came to the city forced by the political, economic and social forces and which also shepherded his work toward this menial and ultimately fatal task. This kind of work is banned and yet many like him are doing it with full cognizance of the Government. Further, due to the callousness of the state towards his work and work condition, he died cleaning a manhole.

In the absence of the Government's commitment to these workers, it is the passerby Anjaneyulu who acted with compassion and in that act gave his life up alongside Satyam. It is not difficult to see that Anjaneyulu too was from an untouchable caste – nobody else would have entered a manhole!

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