

## REVISIT THE QUESTION OF SCAVENGERS AND SCAVENGING IN INDIA: A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS

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### ABSTRACT:

Scavenging considered as highly demeaning, impure and abhorred practice in India Scavengers are in the state of permanent pollution and the idea governs their entire sphere of interaction. The scavengers relegated at the bottom of human society in India. They are considered less than animal in Indian society. Even the other scheduled castes are ranked by custom and public opinion in various level of acceptability, but scavengers and sanitation workers have been for endless generations relegated to the stigma of untouchable category, due to the repulsive nature of their duties connected with the insanitary services. Scavengers cannot aspire for securing respectable jobs. They are overwhelmingly found in the sanitary section of Indian society. They are scavengers, they do other kinds of odd jobs which are not only considered to be important, but a sense of stigma and filth based on the notion of purity-pollution is attached to them. It is always treated as despicable. They are backward and often repressed because they have been assigned the lowest status in Indian society. Scavengers work to maintain the health of the society by maintaining hygiene in the society. The forgoing analysis reveals that the scavengers as an occupational community are an important constituent of our society who perform an important task. This paper is to be important chain in creating public awareness about their plight. In the process of understanding their mobility it became very clear that mobility is very low as they continue to perform their tasks accepting them as their caste roles without any resistance. Many of them continue to do the unclean job because alternative occupation are either not available or are not remunerative and secure. Practice of untouchability continues to pervade life of these people and this continues even the present situation when India claims to have Swacchh bharat abiyam. All this points to the fact, that this community remains to be socially deprived. According to 2011 census data, In India there are 2606278 dry latrins and there are 794390 identified manual scavengers to remove human excreta.

The National commission for safai karamcharis, a statutory body, pointed in its reports to the use of dry latrines and continued employment of manual scavengers by various departments of the Union of India particularly the railways, the department of defence and the ministry of industry While states like Haryana Uttar Pradesh deny employing manual scavengers, other states like Andhra Pradesh employ them through municipalities. The practice is on in almost all states, including Bihar, Maharashtra, Jammu & Kashmir and even national capital Delhi.

## **LEGAL MEASURES TAKEN FOR ERADICATION**

This practice is prevalent in many parts of India. The practice of human waste removal and the construction of dry pit latrines were banned in 1993 with the passage of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines Prohibition Act. The employment of manual scavengers and construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 came into force in six states (Andhra Pradesh, Karnataka, Goa, Maharashtra, Tripura and West Bengal) and all the union territories under clause (1) of Article 252 of the constitution of India. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 punishes the employment of scavengers or the construction of dry (non -flush) latrines with imprisonment for up to one year and/or a fine of Rs 2,000. But No convictions were obtained under the law during the 20 years it was in force. As of 2007 19 states and all Union Territories adopted the Act and nine states were yet to adopt it. Even after 15 years not much progress in eradicating this inhuman practice. However, despite this and other legal actions, laws are rarely enforced largely because other feasible sanitation alternatives have yet to be determined. Although specifically banned by a law passed in 2003 manual scavenging continues with Census 2011 estimating that nearly 8 lakh people were involved in it. In 2014, the Supreme Court ordered the government to take swift measures to end the system. The spirit of Article 17 of the Indian Constitution has not fully touched their lives as yet. It is true that the previous 10 Five Year Plans had initiated some steps to improve the conditions of Scavengers and there are several schemes already in place. But their implementation leaves much to be desired, with the result the manual scavengers are neither liberated fully nor rehabilitated in the true sense of the term, they remain as mere initial steps.

The term manual scavenger has been defined under section 2(j) of the Act, 1993. It reads as: “manual scavengers” means a person engaged in or employed for carrying human excreta and the expression “manual scavenging” shall be construed accordingly. This is very narrow definition, the expression garbage; sewage etc or any other work which is obnoxious or derogatory to human dignity should be included as recommended by the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis.

The scavenging profession is a direct mockery of India's status as a developing global power because the scavengers continue to be in the same situation in which they were during the pre-independence days. Social discrimination and exclusion are the go of life of Scavengers. Even today the era of modern technology the manual scavenging exists in the form cleaning septic tank. If we see the situation of India particularly some state it can be found in almost all states where septic tank need to clean by human being, Septic tanks have to be cleaned after every one-or two-years interval and wet sludge has to be taken out, which has fresh human excreta floating at the top and emitting obnoxious smell. It needs the service of scavengers for desludging.

The 2013 Act allows the Indian Railways (if they use safety gear and maintain toilets well) to decide when they want to issue the notification on implementing the Act in the Indian Railways. No specific authority is made responsible for rehabilitation. No in term measure till rehabilitation/alternative employment is secured has been provided to victim of scavenging. Manual scavenger community has been deprived of fundamental rights due to the insensitivity of the state and its agencies these communities live in poverty and forced to work under the most unfavourable conditions. (Ministry of social justice and Empowerment 2015).

In India various committees and commissions were set up, laws have been enacted crores of rupees have been spent to eradicate the practice of scavenging. However, even after 70 Years of Independence in India scavenging continues to degrade and shame for whole country. It is irony that there has not been a single prosecution even as the act prescribed 'manual scavenging' as an offence that stipulates imprisonment up to a year and fines up to 2000 rupees or both. The law look like scheme. The power rests with the inspector, while the worker himself cannot file the case. (Frontline, 2015)

## IMPOSED OCCUPATION

"India Shining, "Incredible India", is the words that are totally False in context of Scavengers. Dalits cannot aspire for securing respectable jobs. The dalits are overwhelmingly found in the sanitary section of Indian society. They are scavengers, sweepers, rag-pickers, rickshaw puller they do other kinds of odd jobs which are not only considered to be low level jobs, but a sense of wretchedness and filth based on the stigma of purity-pollution is attached to them. Manual scavenging is a caste-based custom perpetuated by an extremely unequal society. Customs are social constructs that are handed down from generation to coming generation. They often survive the societal change even after their rationale and moral basis becomes insupportable. Since modern Indian nation has been predicated on the rejection of the caste system in so far as it perpetuates oppression and injustice, manual scavenging has become an impediment to social justice and progress. Whereas most of the civilized world has

accepted the ideal that a citizen's caste or creed must not come in the way of exercising his choice of occupation, Indian society still bears manual scavenging that has always been expected to be taken up only by certain communities, That makes it a socially sanctioned and imposed custom in which caste one is born into decides whether he or she will be a beneficiary or a victim. The members of the communities that have been held captive by this tradition face overwhelming social sanctions and even violence when they revolt against this injustice.

## DISCRIMINATION

Scavengers are typically relegated to the outside of towns, particularly in rural villages, where they occupy the village “ghetto.” They cannot enter certain temples, often have trouble obtaining access to water, subsist on menial wages, and are routinely abused by police and higher castes that often enjoy the State’s protection”. In simple words we can say that, Scavengers face discrimination in every aspect of their lives which is undignified. They are deprived of basic amenities, and “suffer from social exclusion and deprivation for the fault of being Dalit specially Scavengers , the lowest caste by Hinduism. Because of their status of untouchability due to their work most Dalits unwillingly do jobs which are assigned to their caste which is ghastly occupation. Scavengers faced isolation from other dalit caste group. Owen Lynch in his study of the low caste in Agra noted that there was a definite opposition to marriage with bhangis (scavengers) ,which only qualified by such provisos as the boy being well educated.(Owen L.1969).In Uttar Pradesh. ,The chamars avoid social interaction with bhangis.(Joshi,B.982)

Bezawada Wilson of the SKA said that mainstream political parties are vying with each other to appropriate Dr Ambedkar's legacy.

"Unless they recognize that the deaths that occur in sewer and septic tanks are not accidents but political murder we do not think they have the right to project themselves as defenders of the rights of Dalits and highly marginalized communities such as manual scavengers,"

## HEALTH STATUS

Scavengers are in trap of high risk of health issue. scavengers suffer from bacterial infection due to their unhygienic work that effects their respiratory and gastrointestinal system. Due to their poor economic condition scavengers are forced to do inhuman and filthy 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 scavenger are doubly marginalised in this occupation social crime against women scavenger by male of their own community as well as their workplace.

### **PICARIOUS AND ISOLATED RESIDENCE**

Scavengers are cursed to live in the most unhygienic conditions. In urban areas they occupy spaces adjacent to drains and in rural areas they live in the low lying water logged areas at the corner end of the village in mud houses or huts thatched with dry twigs of plants and trees. Their precarious economic existence in low paid work carries the stigma attached to their social work which make them realize that they are like, 'the worms that crawl in the dirt.

### **SCHEMES FOR WELFARE AND REHABILITATION**

In view of the existing hereditary obnoxious and inhuman condition of manual scavengers, the Government has formulated various schemes/programmes for their Social and Economic upliftment but they are far from their motto.

Valmiki Malin Basti Awas Yojna (VAMBAY): This scheme was launched by Government of India during 2001 with the aim to provide shelter and upgrade the existing shelter for people living below poverty line in urban slums which helps in making cities slum free. The scheme is shared on 50:50 basis with states. Preference is given to women headed households. The main reason for failure of this Yojna is that there have been serious mistake 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.

Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC): The Total Sanitation Campaign is a comprehensive programme to ensure sanitation facilities in rural areas with broader goal to eradicate the practice of open defecation. TSC was initiated in 1999 when Central Rural Sanitation Programme was restructured making it demand driven and people centered. It follows a principle of "low to no subsidy" where a nominal subsidy in the form of incentive is given to rural poor households for construction of toilets. TSC gives strong emphasis on Information, Education and Communication (IEC), Capacity Building and Hygiene Education for effective behavior change with involvement of Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs), Community Based Organizations (CBOs), and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) etc. The key intervention areas are Individual Household Latrines (IHHL), School Sanitation and Hygiene Education (SSHE), Community Sanitary Complex, Anganwadi toilets supported by Rural

Sanitary Marts (RSMs) and Production Centers. Government programmes have emphasized the mentality change toward sanitation not for sanitation worker or scavengers of rehabilitation and failed to address the caste-based oppression and related social conditions that have perpetuated this practice for centuries.

Nirmal Gram Puraskar Yojna: To add vigour to the TSC, in June 2003, the Government of India initiated an incentive scheme for fully sanitized and open defecation free Gram Panchayats, Blocks, and Districts called the 'Nirmal Gram Puraskar'. The incentive provision is for Panchayati Raj Institutions (PRIs) as well as individuals and organizations that are the driving forces for full sanitation coverage. It is reality that government failed to address the real sanitation worker who works for cleanliness or nirmalta for village.

National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers (NSLRS): The National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers (NSLRS) was launched by the Government in March, 1992 to provide alternate employment to the scavengers and their dependents. Under the NSLRS the scavengers and their dependents are trained in trades of their aptitude which can provide them alternate employment. During the course of training, the trainees get stipend up to Rs.500/- per month and a tool kit allowance up to Rs.2,000/-. For rehabilitation, there is a prescribed financial package for different trades by which financial assistance up to Rs.50,000/- can be provided. Under NSLRS, the Government of India has formulated and issued guidelines to all States and their Special Central Assistance (SCAs) to form groups of 5 to 25 scavengers and start a production-cum-trading-cum service centre for large-scale conversion of dry latrines through Sanitary Marts in which the loan component would be provided by the National Safai Karamcharis Finance and Development Corporation (NSKFD). The Scheme 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 giving financial stipend to scavengers .and the amount given in the name of financial assistance is very low.

While the government has introduced various schemes offering loans and subsidies but they have not succeeded in eliminating manual scavenging.

## **REASON FOR MARGINALIZATION AND PLIGHT OF SCAVENGERS**

- Due to high involvement of middlemen in selection of beneficiaries, actual manual scavengers were left out and never got rehabilitated. Those who were not involved in manual scavenging benefitted from various provisions of the scheme.

- Middlemen had strong connections with local politicians and they intentionally never reached out to manual scavenging community to generate awareness about the scheme.
- In a cross verification exercise of identified and selected beneficiaries by Government officials, huge irregularities were found in disbursement of loan to people from the community. Records showed transfer of loan amount in their name but in reality they did not receive any financial assistance.

Identification of beneficiaries was not done by the District Implementing Officers as required; instead middlemen were involved in selection of beneficiaries who took bribe in disbursement of loan to beneficiaries. Officials at district level had direct linkages and contacts with middlemen instead of community members.

### **POOR IMPLEMENTATION OF CONCEPTION OF LAWS**

Various reports reveal that Government initiatives have failed to produce the desired result among the scavenging communities. Despite several major high-level committees, National Laws and many high and medium level schemes specifically devised to eradicate manual scavenging, the scavengers remained tied to their occupation and the lowest rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy. Analysis reveals that the main problems associated with these laws and schemes are faulty conception, poor coordination between central and state governments in devising rules, implementation and funding; lack of funding; rampant corruption; political rhetoric; severe paucity of political will; meagre investment in sanitary infrastructure; lack of inducement of science and technology and poor understanding of the gender and labour issues of the target groups. These are some of the major causes of the state's failure to meet the pressing demand of the eradication of manual scavenging.

In the Era of Globalization scientific and technological advancement on various fronts saves the manual labour, the practice of manual scavenging continues in India. There are very simple and low cost alternatives available in this era which can solve both the problem of manual scavenging and safe disposable of human excreta highlighted on the separation of all household waste including biodegradable waste which have combined effect for both the municipalities and the households but no scientific advancement seen in work of convenience of scavenger or sanitation worker. It is heartbroken truth and untold miseries of scavengers that they die during the cleaning septic tank. The sewer lines at many places in the cities often get choked up and require constant rectification and clearing of sludge. For the same, a safai karamchhari from Balmiki community has to get into a manhole and clean it, they are not equipped with basic protective gears like gloves ,gas masks, helmets, boots ,reflective jackets, head lights and rain coats causing them to do most of the work manually ,making them prone lot of diseases many times they died in man hole. The news covered by The times of India during Bhim Yatra Mohana Priya a bhim



yatri said “ I have been to all 30 states in the last 125 days and manual scavenging and sewer deaths exist everywhere”.

According to The Times of India SKA alleges that despite the apex court's strict directions, things have not changed and over 1300 people have died in septic tanks or sewers while doing this job. Cleaning septic tanks requires descending into the tank filled with noxious gases, with no protective gear. Often the worker has to completely submerge in the full tank to ensure clearance.

“According to Hindustan Times (Lucknow) 9 Jul 2014 ·One sanitation worker lost his life while cleaning a sewer in Chuniya Purwa area of Jankipuram Lucknow on Tuesday. It appears the mishaps that occurred in the past have failed to have any impact on the Jal Sansthan officials who allegedly forced the victim to clean the sewer without wearing any safety gear. Dheeraj Valmiki (25), a contractual worker working with Jal Sansthan was forced to clean sewer line in Jankipuram, said sources. Quite unwillingly Dheeraj entered the sewer line but he fainted soon. His fellow workers pulled him out of the pit and rushed him to medical college where he was declared brought dead. The sanitation workers said the safety guidelines were violated while entering the sewer and the contractual worker was forced to do the task without any mask. According to manual scavengers, many sanitary workers get into manholes, septic tanks However; JE Suryamani Yadav has reported the matter to the police who have sent the body for post mortem. No Jal Sansthan official was available for comment over the incident.” This is a glimpse of our so called just society that behaves sensitized situation .Can we able to called ourselves Human? This is a only one case that published in newspaper and we come to know about heartbroken truth that still perpetuate by our society as well. We cannot neglect that almost cases are not in record but still they exists.

Bezwada Wilson talks about the Safai Karmchari Andolan’s struggle, and the government’s superficial promotion of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan without accepting that the root of the problem lies in institutional discrimination against the Scheduled castes. “Just picking up the broom and making a show of cleaning will not alter the fact that ‘it will be our lot to clean the toilets. It will be our people who will choke to death in the septic tanks.” Wilson also warns that, if not immediately, in time to come the Dalit uprising, witnessed in parts of the country, will spread and the community will refuse to do any and all cleaning jobs, imposing a crisis of monumental proportion on the government and forcing it to acknowledge that the country cannot progress if one section is treated as unequal and condemned to live in servitude to others.



## CONCLUSION

Scavenger's miseries are challenge for all those who believe in justice and uphold human dignity. A well planned and multi- pronged strategy is needed to scavengers by providing them alternative employment and integrating them to mainstream. Half backed ideas and half- hearted measures could not able to usher the plight of scavengers in India .And finally the state government has to take the responsibility of bringing them to the core from the margins with more initiatives of inclusive policy need to be brought in to the mainstream by putting in some efforts like creating public awareness. Scavenging, the practice still persists in various parts of the country. Existing laws have not proved adequate result in eliminating the twin evils of insanitary latrines and manual scavenging from the country. These evils are inconsistent with the right to live with dignity which is an essence of the Fundamental Rights guaranteed in the Constitution. Its prime responsibility of Government and public – spirited persons look into why scavengers have not been able till today to overcome civil disabilities despite so many laws and measures Gandhiji had said “Persons who are to attend to scavenging whether a paid bhangi or an unpaid mother ,they are unclean work” The Scavengers makes our society clean and healthy. Therefore all of us should accept their work is very important and help them to free from stigmatised work. Science and technology should be integrated with needs of scavengers and invent equipment to minimise manual work. The scientific and technological advancement of India should intimate with relation to scavengers and their transformation for better. People may have noble idea regarding to sanitation field. They may have great strength of will to translate them into reality .But Unless the idea of swacch bharat abhiyan are shared and supported by an appropriate technolog , this may yet be only empty dream.

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