

Sanitation workers in India*

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How many deaths will it take till they know that too many people have died? In just 35 days between mid-July and mid-August this year, in the capital city of Delhi alone, ten sanitation workers died while they were engaged in the poorly paid and extremely hazardous task of manual scavenging. They were entering sewers to clean them, without adequate or even minimal precautions taken by the employers (like safety gear) that would allow these workers to deal with the noxious and even toxic gases, slippery floors, high walls and often very high temperatures in these sewers.

Manual scavenging is defined as “the removal of human excrement from public streets and dry latrines, cleaning septic tanks, gutters and sewers”. This practice is still widely prevalent in India, driven not only by class and income divides, but much more by caste and patriarchy. All manual scavengers in the country are Dalit, and even among different Dalit castes, such workers tend to be lower in the hierarchy, coming from some of the most marginalised and oppressed sub-castes.

And within such work there is a clear gender divide: women workers dominate in the cleaning, removal and carrying of faeces from toilets, in both rural and urban areas. This work tends to be the lowest paid, with some instances being recorded of unbelievable rates like Rs 150 rupees per month and a roti or two per day per household thus served. Meanwhile men work in cleaning septic tanks, gutters and sewers. Both types of task are unpleasant and unhealthy, and even carry severe risks to life.

It is clearly one of the most perilous occupations in India. Remarkably, there are no official data on this, but independent surveys indicate that at least 1370 deaths per year have occurred during such work, and even this is probably a serious underestimate. As many as 2 per cent of workers have been estimated to die in the course of their work, because of lack of protective equipment and minimal safety measures. In any case these workers have major health problems and tend to die early, because of the continuous inhalation of noxious fumes, the susceptibility to disease that comes from dealing with faeces, and related risks. Such work directly leads to nausea, skin infections, anaemia, diarrhoea, vomiting, jaundice and trachoma, which also affect not only the men who enter the sewers and septic tanks to clean them, but the women who carry uncovered loads of excreta on their heads. It is common to find cardiovascular degeneration, musculoskeletal disorders, infections, skin diseases and respiratory ailments among such workers. And because these workers are typically so poorly paid, they also suffer from undernutrition and cannot avail of adequate preventive or curative health services.

It is true, that after this latest spike in such deaths in the capital city, there has been some reportage, and some outcry, typical of the episodic and sensation-driven interest that characterises media coverage of most matters in India. But imagine the coverage if the same number of soldiers had died, or even if as many cows had suddenly been found dead in the same city. What is worse, there is simply not enough attention to the fact that official practices, along with the current central government’s flagship “Swachh Bharat Abhiyan” (SBA), actually make matters significantly worse by

implicitly relying on this form of labour, without concern for the lives, safety and working conditions of such workers.

Two laws promulgated by the central government in the past two decades have sought to address the issue of such work and its conditions. The 1993 law –the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 – did not ban such work, but rather sought to regulate its conditions and furthermore it had no real provision for punishing those who did not comply. Unsurprisingly, it had little or no impact in addressing either the existence or the nature of this practice.

Prolonged agitation and lobbying by the Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) and others led to the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. This Act prohibited the construction or maintenance of insanitary toilets and the engagement or employment of anyone as a manual scavenger. It also forbade the employment of workers for hazardous cleaning of a sewer or a septic tank (that is, without adequate safety gear and other precautions), even in emergency situations. Violations could result in a years' imprisonment or a fine of Rs 50,000 or both. If a worker died while performing such work, even with safety gear and other precautions, the employer was required to pay compensation of Rs 10 lakh to the family.

The law also required the government to survey and estimate the actual number of such workers and take immediate measures to rehabilitate them with other employment. It fixed responsibility on each local authority, cantonment board and railway authority to survey insanitary (dry) latrines within its jurisdiction and to construct sanitary community latrines. All this was further strengthened – at least legally – by a case heard in 2014, of the Safai Karamchari Andolan vs. Union of India, in which the Supreme Court ordered the abolition of the practice of manual scavenging and asked for the implementation of rehabilitation of such workers.

Sadly, even all this seems to have had relatively little result, with poor implementation and little punitive action that would serve as a deterrent. The incidence of manual scavenging continues unabated, as the recent more publicised deaths indicate. Official data from state and central governments massively understate the practice, exemplifying the extraordinary ability of Indians to render invisible any reality that could be uncomfortable. The underestimation is endemic to both official data collection and policy approaches, which deal with the problem by assuming it away.

Thus, the Socio-Economic Caste Census of 2011 identified 1,80,657 manual scavengers across the whole of India, whereas the SKA estimates that the numbers are closer to more than six times that number, at around 1.2 million. The latter seems more reasonable, given the Census 2011 estimate of 2.6 million dry latrines in the country and many more created since then.

So these official claims are easily disproven. Consider an [investigative report on Uttarakhand](#) – one of the five best performing states according to the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan dashboard, with supposedly 100 per cent coverage of individual household latrines. The SECC had identified only 12 manual scavengers in rural areas of that state, and the official SBA records claim there are none left in the state. But reporters visiting Haridwar district found 8 such workers in a single village and at least 500 dry latrines (all requiring manual collection of excreta) in the area served by a single gram

panchayat. In nearby Udham Singh Nagar district, which has also been declared open-defaecation-free by the SBA, it was found that every third household still lacked a toilet and most of the newly installed toilets were dry, requiring manual cleaning.

Some of the worst offenders in perpetuating manual scavenging are not private contractors, but public agencies. For example, the Indian Railways are the largest employer of manual scavengers. It is impossible to identify how many, since they are classified as “sweepers” – but the numbers required must be huge, since the overwhelming majority of trains in the system rely on open toilets that dump faeces onto railway tracks. Most of the workers who have to clean this up (manually of course) are employed through contractors, and earn at best around Rs 200 per day. Once again, they are lucky if they get gloves to wear, and certainly they get little else in the way of protection or safety gear. (If they did get these, apparently they could no longer be considered to be manual scavengers!) Only around one-third of all coaches have been fitted with modern bio-toilet facilities thus far.

This deeply entrenched – and deeply casteist – approach to manual scavenging that has been part of public policy helps to explain why the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan is also in effect relying on this appalling practice. The explicit aims of the SBA were fourfold: to eliminate open defaecation, to eradicate manual scavenging, to bring in modern and scientific municipal solid waste management, and to effect behavioural change regarding healthy sanitation practices. But the energy and resources have been concentrated on the first, with some naming-and-shaming attempts on the fourth. The critical areas of eradication of manual scavenging and rehabilitation of such workers, as well as the associated need to address solid waste management, are all but forgotten.

Therefore, what has been happening is that lots of new toilets are being constructed, without any strategy about how they are to be cleared. They are seldom if ever linked to sewage, drainage and water facilities and solid waste management practices, and there has been little or no investment on procuring mechanized sludge and pump machines for physical removal of excreta.

Finally, the SBA has almost no concern for the rehabilitation of manual scavengers, which is part of its mandate and even required of the government by law. The current Budget allocates the princely sum of Rs 5 crores for such a process, and of course it is easy to claim that the government does not need to spend much to rehabilitate such workers when their existence is denied in the first place. So workers who cannot get other employment, because of caste discrimination in what is anyway a stagnant labour market, are forced to go back to such work.

That is why, as SKA Convenor Bezwada Wilson points out, “Swachh Bharat represents toilet users, not toilet cleaners”. Until we respect and ensure dignity to all manual scavengers, making sure that no one needs to do such work again and that those have been forced to undertake such work are provided gainful employment in decent conditions, a scheme like this will remain a sham.

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