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BEYOND THE BROOM: THE STORY OF SANITATION WORKERS IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

Sanitation workers also known as Scavengers, Civic Workers, Sewage Workers, the maintenances of clean environment has become a challenge and many sanitation Workers are working under Municipal Corporations whose responsibility is to maintain sanitation in their respective towns and cities. Their work includes sweeping roads, cleaning toilets, cleaning septic tanks, disposal of human and animal excreta, collecting and transporting garbage's etc. The sweepers and scavengers in India are known by different names, the most common among them are Mehitar, Bhangi, Chura and the like. Besides the tern Jharna is also used in Punjab and Lal Begi and Valmiki in Uttar Pradesh.



KEYWORDS: Sanitation workers, Scavengers, Civic Workers, Sewage Workers.

INTRODUCTION :

These are the names of two great saints, the first being a Muslim and the other Hindu. The People's Commission on Abolition of Scavenging (1998) reported the use of many other terms for groups performing the task of sweeping and scavenging: Hela, Hari, Hadi, Bhumali, Halalkhor, Doms, Dumras, Dhanuks, Bansphor, Mazhabi, Mikhair, Thoti, Chachati, Pakay, Relli, Ghasi, Olgana, Zadmalli, Jamphoda and Metariya. Col. Tod described them as "refuse of mankind." The Gazette of India Extra Ordinary - 9, Part II dated September 20, 1976, Part XV Rajasthan (enforced w.e.f. July, 1977) identified 59 scheduled castes in Rajasthan which included scavenging castes known as "Bhangi, Chura, Mehtar, Clgana, Rukhi, Malkana, Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Balmiki, Kerar, and Zadmall" (Govt. of Rajasthan, 2006).

BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The warriors who were defeated in the battle and made captives were forced to perform scavenging work (Malkani, 1960). Many noted the historical existence of scavenging as a profession. The disposal of human excreta was mentioned as one of 15 duties of slaves enumerated by Naradiya Samhita. The terms Chandal and Paulkasa were mentioned for those engaged in the task of disposal of night soil (Nagar, 1980:8). These two terms were used also during Buddhist period. The scavengers and sweepers were known to clean the city and disposal of night soil in Patliputra during Maurya Period. Those who entered into the profession under compulsions of war or earning a living never came out of it; they became untouchables forever.

The important aspect of India is its caste system in which a particular occupation is associated with each caste. While higher castes enjoy wide range of choices in occupations, the unclean jobs got associated with lower castes which include sweeping streets, cleaning drains and sewers, removal of human and animal waste, leather processing, raising of pigs and the like. As most towns and villages did not have flush latrines, sweepers were manually handling human excreta and carry it on their heads. Leatherwork includes handling of dead animals and removal of their skin and hence, it is also viewed unclean. Such jobs are considered not only polluting but are also of low paid which included payment in the form of left-over from kitchen as well (Anand, Mulk Raj, 1970).

DEFINITION

The World Health Organization (WHO) aligns with international and Indian legal definitions (such as the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013) to define a manual scavenger as anyone employed to manually clean, carry, dispose of, or handle untreated human excreta in insanitary latrines, open drains, or railway tracks. The WHO categorizes this practice as an inherently hazardous and dehumanizing form of **sanitation work**.

Types of Scavengers

The International Labour Organization (ILO) categorizes this work into three primary types:

- **Dry Latrine Cleaning:** Manually emptying excreta from dry toilets (those without a modern water-flush system) and carrying the waste in baskets or buckets to disposal sites.
- **Sewer and Gutter Cleaning:** Manually entering open drains, gutters, and underground sewer lines to clear blockages, silt, and human waste. Septic
- **Tank Cleaning:** Descending into enclosed, often unventilated septic tanks and pits to manually remove and transport accumulated sludge.

The practice of manual cleaning of night soil was not unique to India; it was prevalent in European countries and America as well (Hamlin, 1982). Prior to the emergence of the water closet, the sewage of European cities used to be disposed off by "scavengers", the men making nightly rounds, collecting the contents of privy vaults and carting them to nearby farming areas. The practice was followed in America as well. However, the scavenging system came to an end by the middle of 19th century with the development of higher technology and other changes (Pathak, 1991).

Sinha and Sinha (1986), who peeped into the history, noted women and sudras as the most oppressed communities in Hindu society. This permits the whole Indian history. Kings have come and gone, empires have built and vanished but these two groups suffered all through the ages. The residences of Sudra in towns and villages are segregated and secluded from the rest of the community members. Numerous harijan colonies/ basties have sprang up all over the country amounting to permanent ostracism of harijans. The women and shudras were condemned forever by Manu in Manusmriti. The myth of caste superiority is so strong that the pious teaching of renowned social reformers during 16 to 19th century has cut no ice with those who consider the oppression of these two groups a matter of divine rule.

According to the census 2001 there are 6400 castes and sub castes, which have hierarchical features, and among them some have got a higher position and some have got lower status which has been clearly depicted in the Rig-Veda.... In the smrities off the puruṣa sukta which says that the castes were originated from the various organs of Bahamian, i.e. the bromines from the head, ashtrays from the shoulders and vanishes from their and from the foot were the shudders (S.C.Dube.1994). And the karma Siddhantha also give the various duties of these caste and the division of duties i.e., the Brahmins have to perform the priesthood, kshatriyas, to rule, and go for war and protection, vashiyas as the traders and merchants and the shudders to serve the above their classes (G.S. Gurye, 1984).

Living Conditions of Scavengers

The living conditions of scavengers are very poor. Provision of housing of Bhangis or payment of house rent to such workers who are not provided with free quarters does not find a place in all

municipal acts. Provision of water for drinking or washing in the case of scavengers is very inadequate. Even where storage tanks and water taps are provided the scavengers are put to a lot of suffering. The areas where scavenger resides do not have any latrines. The quarters and localities for scavengers are often situated in unhealthy places in the vicinity of open drain or dump grounds. The dirtiest feature of scavenging work is the process of hand removal of night - soil from the ordinary latrines, in which the night soil drops down in a chamber below, where usually a beset or some other receptacle such a pan, a bucket, etc., is placed.

Attempts to Improve the Conditions of Scavengers:

Rockefeller Foundation made the earliest organised attempt towards prevention of manual handling of night soil in 1930 through introducing bore-hole latrines with pre-cast squatting slabs at its centers located in different states. However, not much success could be achieved. Simple water seal pan over the dug pit, an improved version of the bore-hole, was introduced in Singur Health Center in Bengal but due to requirement of large quantity of water to flush the excreta, the shape was further modified by reducing water seal as well as construction cost. The improvement of health and sanitary conditions has attracted attention of many international agencies such as WHO, UNICEF, UNDP. The programmes of improvement of water supply and provision of adequate system of waste disposal have been initiated on a large scale. These concerns occupy important place in deliberations during Habitat Conference at Vancouver in 1976, UN Water Conference at Mar del Plata in 1977, and International Conference of Primary Health Center at Alma Ata in 1978. The period 1981-90 was declared as the International Drinking Water and Sanitation Decade by UN General Assembly.

The problem of scavenging and improving the conditions of scavengers has persistently been engaging the attention of the Government since independence. The erstwhile Government of Bombay, appointed a committee known as the scavenger's living conditions enquiry committee in 1949 with late Shri.V.N. Brave as chairman to study and enquire into the living conditions of the scavengers in the state of Bombay and to suggest ways and means to improve their present conditions of work and to fix their minimum wages. The committee submitted its report to the government of Bombay in 1952.

In 1955 the Ministry of home affairs circulated a copy of major recommendations of the Brave committee to all the state Government requesting them to adopt these recommendations as they were really capable of wider application and could be implemented profitably by all state government. The ministry of health took a similar action also. The report, relates only to living conditions of scavengers in state of Bombay but some of the points raised therein are of common interest to all state governments (Barve, B.N., 1949).

The word Pourakarmika or Scavengers Originated in 1972 in a conference at Delhi in the month of September by Sri, Basavalingappa. The then minister of municipal Administration changed the name to pourakarmika or scavengers as they were called as sweepers or the scavengers by their caste names and it is on 22nd the day has been celebratrated as the pourakarmika or scavengers day. As the pourakarmiks form the lowest rungs of the social ladder, it is necessary that every effort is made to formulate comprehensive and effective measures to improve their conditions. The process of exploitation of these pourakarmiks by the vested interests should stop forthwith. Salappa, I.P.D. (1976).

In the year 1973 the Government of Karnataka issued orders to all the local bodies banning the carrying of night soil either as head-load or by carts. Many municipalities have implemented this order under reference. But there many other municipalities in North Karnataka area where scavenging is still done by private workers. The reason why it was a failure in North Karnataka area is due to a defect in the government order itself. It is obvious that those municipalities where there were no underground drainage systems could not implement such an order. Secondly. The government order did not ban scavenging by private people. Thirdly, the said government order did not provide alternate employment to those private scavengers in the event of their losing their livelihood as a consequence of this order.

CONCLUSION:

Most of us sweep and clean our homes and we are all used to it. But we are neither called the sweepers or referred to as 'Pura karmikas or Scavengers'. The term pura karmikas is a long winding kannada rendering of the name sweeper and scavengers. There is nothing working at all in being a sweeper, engaged as a sweeper and in doing the sweeping work, but seen as a lowly job considered as a means derogated. Sweeping as a work job and employment is specifically thought and considered to be a menial one. It has been taken up only by some group of community all over the country. Over the recent times, the communities engaged in sweeping have themselves been isolated and segregated as sweeper even with in the communities. Hence the sweepers have to wash, sweep swipe, mop and clean all through the day without any rest in back breaking positions for eight hours, almost all 365 days without any rest or holidays and with no provident fund gratuity or pension.

Encouragements and finance, established well known local missionary institutions, who help and assist the small medium and large special societies co-operatives and as so labours of sweepers to start an administer and manage successfully various developmental women and other self-help group activities. So that the life style and their working nature is entirely different from other work. In total the government should take care about socio economic measures to improvement of scavengers.

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