

Manual Scavenging As Social Exclusion: A Case Study

RAJEEV KUMAR SINGH, ZIYA UDDIN

This note deals with the problem of manual scavenging in India as a form of caste and occupation-based social exclusion. It tries to explore the causes and reasons for the continuance of this social evil in India with a case study of Ghazipur district in eastern Uttar Pradesh.

The day everyone in India gets a toilet to use, I shall know that our country has reached the pinnacle of progress (Jawaharlal Nehru).¹

The term social exclusion is of relatively recent origin; however, it encompasses a wide range of social and economic aspects. Different scholars decipher this notion in various contexts. Broadly, it indicates the relative deprivation of any person or group of persons on various predetermined criterion. Caste-based occupational groups in India, like that of manual scavengers, constitute one such socially, economically, psychologically and politically marginalised section of the society. Although manual scavenging was banned twice (in 1952 and 1993), this practice still continues in various pockets of the country under different names.

The concept of social exclusion, generally in development literature has been defined as an inability to choose or lack of capability to fully participate in the development of a society. In India, social exclusion revolves around some sections of the population, particularly, dalits, adivasis, women and minorities. They are the victims of social exclusion by caste, sex, ethnicity and by religion. In the society, they are isolated, discriminated and deprived of equal access to social and economic opportunities. Therefore, in the Indian context, the core feature of social exclusion is the denial of equal opportunities by certain groups of the society which impose themselves upon others that leads the inability of an individual to participate in the basic political, economic and social functioning of society. Manual scavengers in India, who are caste-based occupational groups, constitute one such socially excluded class.

The evil of manual scavenging is directly related to the lack of availability of sanitation facilities. Like food, clothing

and shelter, proper sanitation is one of the basic requirements of mankind. Poor sanitary conditions lead to water-borne diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery, etc. While the lack of sanitation facilities affects all individuals, children and women are particularly vulnerable. As per the World Health Report, 1999, only 49% of the urban population (in 1997), and merely 14% of the rural population² (in 2000) have adequate facility for excreta disposal. The problem is more conspicuous in developing countries like India, where practices like the use of dry latrines, manual removal of human excreta, defecating in the open place, etc, exist.

Scavengers' Story

Manual scavenging is the removal of excreta (night soil) manually from "dry toilets", i.e., the toilets without modern flush system. The system of building public toilets and employing people to remove excreta was introduced during British rule in India, when municipalities were constituted. That time, often containers were used in such toilets, that needed to be emptied daily. After the invention of flush type toilets, all other types of toilets disappeared from the western world. However, this inhumane practice continues in many developing countries including India.

The sociocultural and economic realities of modern India reveal a series of paradoxes. While legally manual scavenging is banned, caste apartheid and poverty perpetuate this practice. In India, manual scavenging is a caste-based occupation carried out by dalits. The manual scavengers have different caste names in different parts of the country: Bhangis in Gujarat and Uttar Pradesh, Phakis in Andhra Pradesh and Sikkaliars in Tamil Nadu. These communities are invariably placed at the bottom of the caste hierarchy as well as dalit sub-caste hierarchy. Refusal to perform such manual task leads to physical abuse and a social boycott. Manual scavengers are exposed to the most virulent forms of viral and bacterial infections that affect their skin, eyes, limbs, respiratory and gastro-intestinal systems. Tuberculosis is rife in the community. A 2002 report prepared by the International

Rajeev Kumar Singh (rajeevpol@gmail.com) and Ziyauddin (ziyasocio@gmail.com) are research scholars in the Banaras Hindu University, Varanasi.

Dalit Solidarity Network (including Human Rights Watch (US), Navserjan (Ahmedabad, Gujarat)) and the National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights (NCDHR) estimates the number of dalit manual scavengers at one million³ (see the table).

A random survey conducted by Action-Aid in 2002 in six states – Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar – claimed that manual scavengers were found working on at least 30,000 dry toilets. The survey also pointed out that, these scavengers face severe discrimination even from other dalits.⁴ The National Commission for Safai Karmchhari, a statutory body, has pointed out in its reports that the use of dry latrines and continuing employment

Table: Number of Persons Engaged in Manual Scavenging

Sr	Name of State/UT	No of Scavengers
1	Andhra Pradesh	30921
2	Assam	40413
3	Bihar	12226
4	Gujarat	64195
5	Haryana	36362
6	Himanchal Pradesh	4757
7	Jammu and Kashmir	4150
8	Karnataka	14555
9	Kerala	1339
10	Madhya Pradesh	80072
11	Maharashtra	64785
12	Orissa	35049
13	Punjab	531
14	Rajasthan	57736
15	Tamil Nadu	35561
16	Uttar Pradesh	149202
17	West Bengal	23852
18	Delhi	17420
19	Nagaland	1800
20	Meghalaya	607
21	Pondicherry	476
	Total	676009

Source: NSSO 47th Report; www.censusindia.net

of manual scavengers by various departments of the government of India, particularly in the departments like the railways, defence and ministry of industry. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 punishes the employment of scavengers or construction of dry non-flushed latrines with imprisonment for up to one year and or the fine of Rs 2,000. Offenders are also liable to prosecution under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Aristocracies)

Act, 1989. Given the high prevalence of the illegal practice, the government of India launched a national scheme in 1992 for identifying, training and rehabilitating safai karmchhari and allotted substantial funds for this purpose.

The Rajiv Gandhi Mission for Sanitation and Water Supply Scheme introduced by the ministry of rural development aims at converting dry latrines into wet water-borne sanitary latrines and rehabilitating the liberated scavengers in alternative occupations.⁵

However, it has been noticed that, even though scavengers are trained and assisted for taking up alternative occupations, some of them again come back to manual scavenging. Scavenging does not require any skill and provides some additional income with no competition, investment and risk. These features coupled with the need for cleaning dry latrines and a lack of alternatives, force the scavengers, particularly women, to continue in this occupation. It has also been found that in certain cases, scavengers also face a difficulty in taking up other occupations like running shops due to the prevailing social prejudices.

Field Study

In this note we analyse the causes and consequences of manual scavenging in Ghazipur district, Uttar Pradesh. The study is based on the pilot survey that was conducted from July to September 2007 with the help of a local non-governmental organisation (NGO) the Community Development Society. During this study we conducted informal interviews of the 72 scavengers of different blocks of the Ghazipur district. We also interviewed and interacted with the people of prominent sections of the district. Ghazipur consists of 17 blocks and five tehsils. As of 2001 Census, Ghazipur has a population of 30.49 lakhs. There is a huge gap between male and female literacy. While literacy rate among males is 72%, it is merely 48% among females. The sex ratio of the district is 974.⁶

During the survey in different blocks of Ghazipur district, we found that scavenger system was closely associated with the caste and religious structure of society. Nearly all scavengers with whom we interacted belonged to Mehtar caste, which is on the lowest rung of the social hierarchy.

The houses of these scavengers situated outside the main residential area and they dwell in very poor and unhygienic conditions. They are not allowed to dine and interact with the people of higher caste. The prevalence of alcoholism and drug addiction is very high among the Mehtar community. This results in most of the scavengers being involved in this practice as women, have also to play the part of the bread-earner. However, in four cases, it was observed that this occupation was carried forward by the next generation as their parents or forefathers do not want to lose their patrons. The tendency of hiring manual scavengers is more prevalent among the middle class Muslims. This is because of the evil of purdah system apart from the absence of modern flush system toilets.

Out of the total 72 manual scavengers informally interviewed during the study, it was found that only a few of them belonged to the age group of 20-30, while most of them were in the age group of 30 to 50. Fourteen of them have no other source of income, while 36 of them have extra one bread-earner in their families. But this extra source of income is not permanent as they work on daily wages and their per-day income varies from Rs 20 to Rs 50. Eight of the total 72 respondents interviewed have Rs 1,250 as their monthly income, while 42 report nearly Rs 1,600. Also a division emerges among these Mehtars as a few of them got jobs in local bodies like municipalities or hospitals, etc, and have a continuous source of income. A shocking trend is that most of the women (nearly 90%) are working as scavengers for more than 15 years, and nearly 50% of the total respondents had worked for more than the 20 years. They have inherited this job from their forefathers and now younger generation of the family (especially, daughter-in-laws, and sons) is helping them in this task. The day of these women starts at 5 am and most of them continue it up to 11 am without having any meal.

The average age of workers is approximately 41.2 years. This shows that people who are working as scavengers mostly belong to middle aged group. Also it reveals that 66.6% respondents belong to 35-45 years age group.

The mean of working experience is 20.4 years. This shows that people who are working presently are indulged in this area for a long time. Either they are bonded to work in this menial job or they do not have any other opportunity. Further, an average respondent works in 11 houses for her/his earnings. It also reveals that her/his earning from this work is meagre.

It was also found that some scavengers have tried to challenge their social and economic status by changing their jobs. But finally, they have to return to their original profession because of a social boycott and the lack of support from both private and governmental agencies. The law and order machinery has also proved inefficient. For example, Chinta Devi of Meherpur locality, started her shop with a loan arranged by a local NGO and left this menial job. But later she resumed this humiliating job as she faced a severe boycott even by her own community. However, this is not true in all cases. Some people have successfully left scavenging and have started new ventures or have been working in new jobs.

The blocks of Mohammadabad, Barachor, Sadarand Kashimabad are the worst-affected by the manual scavenging. The narrow and dirty streets in this area shows the old pattern of the toilets which need to be cleared manually. In fact, in Ghazipur, it is basically a Muslim-centred problem as Hindu middle class people are better-off and their lower middle class women go out to defecate, while due to purdah system the Muslim women have to remain inside their houses and their economic condition does not allow them to upgrade their toilets. Also, scavengers and their family members act as *praja* or the dependents which, in turn, adds to social prestige.

The aforesaid analysis of the data gathered from eastern Uttar Pradesh shows that there is no proper consonance between theoretical formulation of the welfare programmes for the upliftment of the scavengers in India and real life conditions. This may be attributed to the dominant nature of the social structure as well as India's emerging social formation, particularly since independence. We observe a big hiatus between the communicative

and the motivational structure on the one hand, and the opportunity structure on the other (Atal 1998). No doubt that the state has talked a lot about palliatives for the improvement of this segment of society but because of the conditioned psychological make-up of the scavengers or the equivocation expressed by the state, the exploitation is continuing. The state has largely reflected the expression of a handful of the dominant sections, where not only caste, but also some of the feudalistic remnants of the system are responsible (Beteille 1969). It is also because of this element that the scavengers are constrained to remain in this status. The scavengers have become totally conditioned to remain satisfied with their life-style (Singh 1994).

Conclusions and Suggestions

The practice of caste-based exclusion and discrimination thus necessarily involves failure of access and entitlements not only to economic rights, but also to civil, cultural and political rights. It involves what has been described as "living mode exclusion"; exclusion from political participation and exclusion and disadvantage from social and economic opportunities.⁷ The caste-untouchability-based exclusion thus reflects the inability of individuals and groups like that of scavengers to interact freely and productively with others and to take part in full economic, social and political life of the community.

To improve the living and working condition of manual scavengers all over India, there is a need to set an agenda for their overall transformation. It can be through provision of alternative livelihoods, abolishment of dry toilets and imparting free education to children. There are several possible fields in which former manual scavengers can work and earn an alternative livelihood. It is possible to provide jobs in agricultural sector. With a little training in maths they can also work as vegetable and fruit sellers. They can produce and sell diary products, if they are provided with cattle. Also if they would be provided with loans and equipment like spice grinding machines and sewing machines, it would be possible for them to set up a new business in producing and selling spices, clothes and handicrafts.

Another possible job opportunity would be in the houses of open-minded families as domestic help or housekeeper. Most urgent is the abolishment of dry latrines. By doing this, the basis for the inhumane and existing system of manual scavenging will be removed. At the same time, there is a need to introduce alternative toilet systems like water-seal latrines or even eco-friendly toilets. Eco-friendly toilets are built above the ground with two chambers beneath the par collecting faecal matter. The urine and wash water are diverted and let out into a home garden. Normally, these toilets do not smell, because faeces are covered with dry ash, soil or lime which dehydrate it.

The life of scavengers can be improved, especially of women and children by providing them good quality education through well-trained, open-minded teachers. Such schools should not only implement mid-day meal scheme, but should also provide the evening food to the children of the socially downgraded people, so that their parents will not face any additional burden of nurturing their children. For the adult members of the scavenger community, education is essential to train them for alternative ways of living, for example, women can have training in sewing, packing or to work as anganwadi workers. Furthermore, other parts of society have to become more sensitive to the needs of the neglected and oppressed dalit community. This can happen through awareness campaigns or training courses in schools.

NOTES

- 1 *The Collected Speech's of Jawaharlal Nehru*, Vol 2, New Delhi, 1976.
- 2 World Health Organisation, Annual Report, 2000.
- 3 National Campaign on Dalit Human Rights; www.NCDHR.com
- 4 Action Aid Report, New Delhi, 2003.
- 5 India, Publication Division, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, New Delhi, 1999.
- 6 District Development Booklet, Public Relation and Information Department, Government of Uttar Pradesh, 2002.
- 7 S Venkatesan, *Social Exclusion and Poverty: Some Key Interlinkages*.

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- Beteille, Andre (1969): *Social Inequality* (New Delhi: Penguin Books).
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