

Study On Scavengers: Community of Different Names

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Abstract: The country has made multifaceted development in almost all areas since its independence. The concerning matter is that despite achievements, the country has not made desired progress in the area of social justice and social development. While a parliamentary law bans the manual scavenging and the government approves projects to wean the underprivileged section away from this dehumanizing occupation, cruel caste apartheid and brutalizing poverty perpetuate the practice. Furthermore, neo-liberal economic policies restrict alternative possibilities of having a dignified livelihood (Sunil Kuksal, 2009). At the onset of new century even after 62 years of independence and 16th years of passing 'the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrine (Prohibition) Act, the irony is that a few people of Scheduled Castes and among other religions are still involved in the hereditary occupation of manual scavenging. This occupation is despicable and degrading for those involved in it. (Akash Gulalia 2003).

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Introduction

India still has around six lakhs (600000) scavengers engaged in the sub-human and defiling tasks of removing and transporting night soil. According to Task Force, there were 76.4 lakhs of dry latrine in the country, of which 54.2 lakhs in the urban areas and 22.2 lakhs in rural areas. (Task Force constituted by Planning Commission, Govt. of India, 1991). Interestingly, the exact report relating statistics of Scavengers is not prepared yet by the Central Govt. The number of manual scavengers in the country according to the official statistics of the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India was 676009 for the year 2002-2003. (The working group on the empowerment of Scheduled Castes (SCs) for the 11th five year plan (2007-12). A survey conducted by different states and UT, reported that 770338 scavengers and there dependents in India, of these 427870 scavengers have been rehabilitated by the Govt. Estimates say that there are more than 3.2 lakh manual scavengers (The Tribune, Sep. 20, 2006). But independent estimates indicate that there could be about twelve lakh manual scavengers in the country. The highest numbers were in Uttar Pradesh 149202 followed by Madhya Pradesh (80072) and Maharashtra (64785) (The working group on the empowerment of Scheduled Castes for the 11th five year plan (2007-12).

1.1 Scavenging: Historical Perspective:

Scavenging is an old age practice. Its origin could be traced to the beginning of urban settlements (Sachidananda, 2004). It was not unique to India; it was also 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 circumstances prevailing in Muslim countries also suggest existence of cleaning night soil and its disposal. The religious sanctions related to Bait-al-Khola (latrine) in Arabia and sanction of purdah restricting free movement of women made it necessary to have a place of defecation by women within the house and the disposal of night soil elsewhere (Pathak,1991). In India, it involves some caste groups who have been condemned to this profession since time immemorial; this inhuman practice includes manual scavenging which still exists in a large number of towns and even in some pockets of big cities. This is an area of concern not only for the government but also for the larger society (Sachidananda, 2004). An important feature of the Indian caste system is that 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. The group of scavengers is placed lowest in caste-based hierarchy. Its members are bound not only by traditional obligations and customary rules to practice this ubiquitous occupation but mythological sanctions also oblige them to carry night soil physically for disposal. Everyone borne in the sub-caste of scavengers is destined to take up this subhuman profession (Phatak, 1991). R. E. Enthoven in his book, *Tribes and Castes of Bombay* (1920) writes that scavengers are the drags of Hindu society; and mixture of outcastes, who have fallen to this level owing to offences against the social codes of higher castes. They were expressly 'excluded' (niravasita) from the mainstream of Hindu society. They were quite outside the pale of society, and were held in utter contempt and treated as untouchables. They were cruelly treated and have no civil rights. These peoples were not allowed to live in the main town or village, but had to dwell in hutments, resembling monstrous wounds on earth, outside the boundaries. No man of higher caste/class might or could have any but the most distant relations with a scavenger for fear of losing his religious purity. They had become so strictly untouchable that they were forced to strike a wooden clapper on entering a town/village, to warn the higher castes of their polluting approach. A scavenger was to eat the remnants of his master's food, wear his discarded clothes, and use his broken furniture. He was denied access to temples and debarred from orthodox religion. He was not allowed to hear or recite the Vedas and other sacred texts of the Hindus (Tripathy, S. 2004). Crookes also states that they must live without town, whence the name Antavasin or Antevasin, 'one who dwells near the boundaries'. Their sole wealth must be dogs and asses; their clothes must consist of the cerecloths of the dead; their dishes must be broken pots, and ornaments of rustle iron. No one who regards his duties must hold any intercourse with them, and they must marry only among themselves—a prohibition which takes us back to the very beginning of the caste system. By day they may roam about for the purpose of work, be distinguished by the badges of the Raja, and they must carry out the corpse of any one who dies without kindred. They should always be employed to slay those who by the law are sentenced to be put to death, and may take the clothes of the slain, their beds and their ornaments. (Crooke W., 1896). According to Ibbetson (1916), "Socially they are the lowest of the low, even lower perhaps than the

vagrant Sansi and the gipsy Nat, and as a rule can hardly be said stand even at the foot of the social ladder, though some sections of the clan have mounted the first one or two steps. Their hereditary occupation is scavenging, sweeping the houses and streets, working up, carrying to the fields, and distributing manure, and in cities and in villages, houses where the women are strictly secluded removing night soil. They alone of all keep those impure animals, pigs and fowls; and the leather-workers alone eat the flesh of animals that have died of disease or by natural death. Together with the vagrants and gypsies, they are the hereditary workers in grass and reeds, from which they make winnowing pans and other articles in agriculture" (Ibbetson, 1916).

Scavengers: Community of Different Names

In different regions, scavengers are known by different names. For example, they are known as Mehtars in Bihar, Churhas and Jharna in Punjab, Dumars in Rajasthan, Bhanghi in Gujarat, Bhumina in West Bengal, Heddish in Orissa, Balmiki in Delhi, Lal Begi and Valmiki in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh; and Halalkhore, Chura, Hari, lalbegi, etc in other part of the country. The names, Lal Begi and Valmiki are related with the names of two great saints, the first being a Muslim and the other Hindu. (Choudhary, 2000). In Haryana, these are also called Balmiki, Churha, Bhanghi, Lalbegi, Khakrobe. Choudhary and Jamadar are two titles used for this community (B. K. Nagla, 2004). Mehtar means 'prince or leader' that is applied to the servants of Emperor Humayun and also known as 'Kakrob' or 'sweeper of dust' and 'Baharwala', one who is not admitted into the houses. The term 'Bhanghi' is derived from Sanskrit word 'bhang' means hemp. It seems to be an allusion to their drinking habits (Akash Gulalia, 2003). Isaacs (1965) defined it as, "night soil has traditionally been the task of untouchables at the bottom of even the untouchables's scale. This kind of scavenger is known as Bhanghi and Bhangis are a people apart even among people apart". Crookes states that the modern Bhanghi is apparently the representative of the Chandala of Manu, a descended by a Shudra from Brahmani women. The term 'Chandal' is now-a-days used only in the sense of contumely, and the so-called Chandals of Bengal invariably call themselves Namshudras, and "with characteristics jealousy the higher division of the caste apply the name Chandal to the lower, who in their turn pass it on to the Dom" (Crooke W., 1896). Thus, it may be rightly concluded that the sweepers and scavengers in India are known by different names, the most common among them are Mehtar, Bhanghi, Chura and the like. But whatever their names, all of them are at the bottom of social ladder and are regarded as very unclean, both by Hindu and

Mulims. Colonel Tod calls them the 'refuse of mankind'. (Tripathy, S. 2004).

b) Sub categories in scavenging:

The posts of the sweepers go under various categories which are descriptive of the jobs performed. The categories are – Road Sweepers, Latrine Sweepers, Drain Sweepers, Lorry Sweepers (known also as Lorry Beldars) and Sweepers of Sewer Gang. The first type of Sweepers, i.e. Road Sweepers, Latrine Sweepers and Drain Sweepers are organized into work team or squads. Road Sweepers are responsible for cleanliness of streets, lane or road in a specific area. They collected garbage from streets and lanes and piled up into convenient corners. Drain Sweepers clean the gutters and drains with long-handed brooms made of stiff-twigs, as a stream of water is directed into the clogged gutters by a man carrying a goatskin waterbag. Here is the main interesting point that Road Sweeping is known as dry sweeping among the Bhangi and is considered less dirty than wet sweeping as it does not entail contact with urine and faces. Latrine Sweepers are those who clean public latrines not related with personal latrines. Public latrines are those, not many in number, which are for the 'convenience' of the general public. The Lorry Beldars load and unload the Lorries with shovels, called 'belcha'. In other word, heaps of garbage, collected in dhaloas or garbage depots are transferred to garbage Lorries which are then driven off to the dumping grounds. And, the last category, i.e. Sewer Gang, maintain the sewerage system in good flow. They work with a variety of tools and implements, of which the handiest is a flexible bamboo pole which can pierce through and loosen obstructions in the sewer pipes. Self employed sweepers who collect garbage from households also carry garbage and night soil to the dhaloas usually in a basket or shadow bowl (Rama Sharma, 1995). The Sub Group also classified it into three categories, i.e. Manual Scavengers, Sewer Workers and Sanitation Workers and used the term 'Safai Karamcharies' for it by recognizing as 'any person employed or engaged to manually clear, carry or dispose human excreta partially or fully'. However, it recognize the differences in the nature of the above three sub-categories. (Report of Sub Group on Safai Karamcharies, 2007-12). Thus, it is clear that the 'sweeping/scavenging includes various sub categories and a particular caste is found involve in this dehumanizing work in a specified area.

Attempts to Improve Conditions of Scavengers:

In order to stop the widely prevalent practice of carrying night-soil as head loads and to improve the working condition of scavengers, massive efforts has been done by some social

workers, voluntary organizations (NGOs) and by Central and State Governments.

a) Efforts made by Social Workers:

Mahatma Gandhi was first to take up the cause of Bhangis, made a move towards liberating scavengers from cleaning night soil and raises their status in society. During 1901 convention of National Congress held in Calcutta, he advised volunteers against employing scavengers for the purpose and he set an example by cleaning his own night soil with a broom. This encouraged volunteers to act upon Gandhi's advice whenever All-India Congress conventions were held. In Sabarmati Ashram also, he advised inmates to do the job themselves rather than employing professional Bhangis. Only a few disciples of Mahatma Gandhi engaged themselves in the programme of liberating scavengers, like Appa Saheb Patwardhan, Anna Saheb Dastane, Atte Guruje, Jiwan Lal, Jai Ram Dass, Thakkar Bapa, etc. With the beginning of the 'Gandhi Centenary period, the two prominent social workers of India- Ishwer Bhai Patel of Gujrat and Dr. Bindeshwar Pathak of Bihar made a tremendous impact on the minds of the planners, administrators, engineers and social scientists, etc., regarding the liberation of scavengers' programme.

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