

# Present Dalit (Scavengers) Situation in India

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The word oppressed, perhaps, conveys, in the nearest sense, the meaning of the word Dalit. The oppression of a set of people in society can have a very wide connotation. I, however, would like to concentrate and confine my talk to the word Dalit being equated with those who are engaged in the profession of scavenging i.e. manual cleaning of excreta of others. Before Independence of our country they were called untouchables. Existence of this class of people is peculiarly related to the Indian caste system which even today prevails in India.

In Indian caste system particularly among Hindus, each caste is traditionally associated with a particular occupation. This phenomenon is so striking that one can say that caste is nothing more than the systematization of occupational differential. The most downgraded occupation was considered to be cleaning or sweeping and removal of human and animal excreta. Where scavengers were concerned the concept of pollution, of being tainted by association or touch or at times even by shadow persisted. In India, caste system crept in amongst members of other religions, as well, even if it did not get associated with ethico-religious ideas; in practice, though, in other non-Hindu religious groups caste hierarchy, as amongst the Hindus, regulates inter-caste relations. The concept of polluting influence of a member of a lower caste may not prevail among the converts or their descendants, but lack of social interaction continues to prevail more or less to the same degree as it did

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during their erstwhile membership of the caste to which they belonged, before getting converted. This is explained by the fact that the majority of the members or their descendants of any religious group in India have been converts from amongst the Hindus. This is true in India of Muslims, Christians, and Sikhs.

The scavengers are also known as Bhangis (considered derogatory) , Balmiki, Chuhra, Mazhabi, Rangreta, Lalbegi, Hela, Hari, Dom, Dhanuk, Thoti, Pakay, Mukhiyar, etc.

The names of scavenging castes suggest that they are a functional community recruited from many different racial and social groups. It is very likely that one of the reasons that may have led people belonging to the lowest strata to take to the profession of scavenging especially in the urban areas was the compulsion, arising due to economic necessity. The great variations in the physical features of the different sections of this community, and also the varied recruitment from higher castes of “broken men\*”, outcasts, destitutes, etc. show that the members of various castes have joined this profession at different points of time obviously owing to economic compulsions. It is also generally believed that after the advent of the Muslims in India ‘sweeping and scavenging’ seems to have taken the form of a formal profession. It is said that the system of bucket privies was designed and constructed by Muslims for their women in ‘pardah’. Those who were made captives, were forced to clean latrines, bucket privies and throw off the night-soil at distant places. These captives when freed, were not accepted by the society and they formed a separate caste and continued the work of scavenging. During the British period with the setting up of army cantonments and municipalities, a large number of people were required to do these services on a regular basis. How could the imperial masters suffer the indignity of being seen going out to answer the call of nature! The white man’s burden, a-la-Kipling, which a white burdened himself with, became the headload of scavengers.

The religion of the sweepers and scavengers is a curious mixture of various faiths. They profess to be Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Sikhs and tribals. They stand at the very bottom of the social ladder. Though all religions, except Hinduism, preach the social equality of all men, they refuse to recognise them as brethren in the faith. They are compelled, on the ground of "untouchability", to do scavenging or sweeping or to remove any carcass or to flay any animal. The "compulsion" includes a threat of social\* or economic boycott. It was untouchability and the practice of social discrimination amongst the Hindus that was largely responsible for conversion to another faith. But the scourge of untouchability never really left those who converted. The change of religion did not bring about any significant change in their occupation or social status. It, however, infused a feeling of greater solidarity amongst them towards members of their own community than towards other members of their religion. For example, a Hindu Chuhra will readily marry a Chuhra girl belonging to Muslim or Christian religion and vice versa, while being reluctant to marry a mate of the same faith, but outside their caste.

The hereditary occupation of the scavengers has been scavenging - removing night-soil and cleaning of latrines, removal of filth, dead cattle, sweeping of houses and roads.

In a large number of States, the job of scavenging of private latrines have been municipalised. It is estimated that about two-thirds of the scavenging population works as municipal employees and the remaining one-third is engaged in the cleaning of bucket privies in private houses. Though, those engaged in private houses consider themselves superior the wages paid to them are lower than those of the municipal employees. The scavengers of private latrines are in a very disadvantageous position as compared to the municipal scavengers. Their housing condition is also far from satisfactory. The habitation of these people is the filthiest spot,

very often near and around a public latrine or a dumping ground and far from their place of work.

Generally where latrines in private households are cleaned by scavengers privately and not on behalf of the municipality, scavengers acquire scavenging right which also become hereditary. Each scavenger acquires a right to clean a specific number of latrines, as against another scavenger by mutual undertaking or agreement.

Some scavengers are noted for their musical ability. They are also very good music band masters and play on 'Sehnai', a musical instrument. In their spare time they make baskets, mats, weaving fans or sieves, etc. They also work as village menials and agricultural labourers, watchmen, drummers, trumpeters and town-criers. During an eclipse the sweepers make good earnings; for it is believed that 'Rahu', the demon who devours the sun and moon and thus causes an eclipse, was either a sweeper or the deity of the sweepers, and alms given to them at this time will appease him and cause him to let the "luminaries" shine again. As soon as the darkening sets in they go about shouting 'Grahandan', 'Vastradan', 'Rupadan', etc.

The sweepers also work as hangman tying a rope round the neck of a criminal shouting 'Dohai Sarkar, Dohai Judge Sahib, Dohai Darogaji' in order to shelter himself under their authority and escape any guilt attaching to the death. The hangman is accompanied by four or five other sweepers of the caste panchayat. The hangman receives some money as his fees. They also work at the burning ghats and are called 'Doms'. One can always find sweepers in all the mortuaries attached to the hospitals.

The jobs of scavengers is not only undesirable, polluting and tedious, but is also low paid. Within the scavenging castes some sections are superior to others, depending upon the type of work a particular section is doing.

The lowest place is generally occupied by those who carry night soil and the highest by those who have given up scavenging.

The scavenging population has grown considerably. In census 1961, they were returned not by profession of scavenging alone but their caste names, (such as Mehtar/Bhangi, Dom/ Dhangad, Mazhabi and Hari/ Hadi etc.) and were 35.32 lakhs which number rose to 59.28 lakhs in 1971. Those amongst the scavenging communities, engaged in the profession of scavenging in 1961, numbered 8,02,400, of whom 3,86,725 were Scheduled Castes constituting 48.20 per cent of the total work force and the remaining 51.80 per cent were non-Scheduled Castes, such as Muslims, Christians.

The Task Force constituted by the Planning Commission (1989) had estimated the number of scavengers belonging to Scheduled Castes as 4 lakhs of whom 3.34 lakhs (83 per cent) were in the urban areas and 67,220 (17 per cent) in rural areas. In the urban areas, 2,06,62 were males and 1,27,167 females. There may be another 3 lakhs from other religious groups, like Muslims, Christians and Tribals and thus the total number of persons engaged in scavenging may be more than 7 lakhs. The Task Force had also estimated that the total number of dry latrines in the country was 76.4 lakhs, of which 54 lakh were in the urban areas and 22.4 lakhs in the rural areas.

A rapid survey to identify scavengers and their dependants, undertaken by the State Governments and Union Territories recently, revealed that there were 6,84,742 scavengers who were actually engaged in manual scavenging in 22 States/UTs. The survey is still incomplete in some States.

The magnitude of the problem of the sanitation is enormous. According to 2001 census there are 122 million households (63.6%) in the country which do not have any kind of toilet facility. Of these 108 million (78.1%) are in the rural and 14 million (26.3%) in the urban areas. Thus, there are 63.6% households in the country people from where go for open

defecation. The census has also given the figures of service latrines (dry latrines) viz. in 13 million households (6.9%), 6 million (4.5%) in rural and 7 million (13%) in the urban areas. These service latrines are cleaned by manual scavenging.

The first sanitation bill was introduced in India in 1878, which envisaged construction of public latrines within the limits of municipalities in Bengal and also to levy fees for cleaning public and private latrines. The provision of the Bill was taken as part of the Bengal Municipal Act, 1876. In Punjab, the Punjab Municipal Act, 1911 (amended from time to time) provided that if a customary sweeper failed to perform scavenging, in a house or building, in a proper way and at reasonable intervals, the occupier of the house or building could complain to a magistrate who, on receiving such a complaint, would hold an inquiry and if it was found that the customary sweeper had failed to perform the scavenging in the house, the magistrate had authority to impose upon the sweeper a fine extending to Rs. 10, (a great sum in those days). Under the provisions of the Act, the municipality could, at any time, undertake the scavenging of any house or building on request or with the consent of the occupier. A similar provision was made in the other States' Municipal Acts. Later concept of imposition of conservancy tax, developed, at times, as a separate tax and at times was included in the property tax.

In 1993, the Parliament passed the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry-Latrines (Prohibition) Bill, to abolish scavenging and ban the construction of dry latrines. Seventeen States and Six Union Territories have adopted this Act by passing resolutions in their Assemblies. The remaining states have not followed suit. Parliament also passed the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993 (as amended) setting up a National Commission for Safai Karamcharis to recommend to the Central Govt. specific programmes of action towards elimination of inequalities in status, providing facilities and opportunities for Safai Karamcharis under a time-bound action plan.

Fortunately, however, the unsatisfactory condition of scavenging work in this country began to draw the attention of social workers as well, since the beginning of the last century. The credit of awakening the sanitary conscience of the people goes largely to Mahatma Gandhi himself. He drew the attention to the problem as far back as 1901 and again in 1908. He set an example by ensuring that no scavenger was engaged in the Ashram set up by him at Sabarmati (locality of Ahmedabad in the State of Gujarat) in 1918. Mahatma Gandhi once said, "I may not be born again, but if it happens, I will like to be born in a family of scavengers so that I may relieve them of the inhuman, unhealthy and hateful practice of carrying night soil."

It was in 1968 i.e. the year of Gandhi Centenary celebration commencement that I was assigned the task of finding out an alternative to scavenging and in 1970 I launched Sulabh Sanitation Movement by setting up, social voluntary non-profit organisation, Sulabh Shauchalaya Sansthan to carry forward the movement which combined in itself sanitation technology and humane ideology.

The crux of the problem was devising a system which would dispense with the need of engaging scavengers to clean human excreta, from the individual households. After extensive research and ground work I came up with a simple and cost-effective low-cost technology of two-pit pour-flush toilet popularly known as Sulabh Shauchalaya.

In India, prior to this the systems that prevailed were and continue to be of sewerage and the one based on septic tanks. The sewerage was introduced in India in 1870 but only in the civil lines. There were no toilets in the Indian Railways. Either it was in 1909, when one Okhil Chandra Sen encountered a very awkward situation owing to nature's call while travelling in a passenger train. Being forced by the intensity of the call he had to get down from the coach on the platform at Ahmedpur station just to relieve himself of the pressure but in doing so, he had the ill luck of being left behind on the platform as the train left the station as per guard's signal.

Being aggrieved, he lodged with the Sahibganj Railway Division, Bengal, a complaint which prompted the British authorities to provide attached toilets in railway coaches used by Indians. The sewerage system, however, is prohibitively costly. In sewerage system the sullage/sewage is either drained out directly in the water bodies or through the Sewage Treatment Plant. The STPs involve costly maintenance and normally are in a state of disrepair. There is the fact also of poor maintenance of the sewerage pipes which lead to pollution. The septic tanks require periodic cleaning either through machines which are costly to maintain or are either unavailable or where so available mostly remain dysfunctional. It also means dumping the sludge at a far away place for atleast a couple of years before it becomes pathogen free.

On the other hand the twin-pit pour-flush water-seal attached Sulabh toilet system was found to be cost-effective, technologically appropriate and culturally acceptable. It is environmental friendly, pollution free, economises water use and has the biggest advantage of on-site disposal. It was this which brought about a revolution in waste matter treatment and disposal.

The Sulabh technology has been approved not only by the Centre and State Governments, but also by WHO, UNICEF, World Bank, UNDP, etc. and was considered as one of the Global Urban Best Practices in the Habitat-II Conference, held at Istanbul, Turkey in June, 1996. UNCHS (Habitat) has also conferred the 2000 Dubai International Award on Sulabh for the “cost-effective and appropriate sanitation system” for improving the environment. The Economic and Social Council of United Nations granted Special Consultative Status to the Sulabh International Social Service Organisation.

But I was not satisfied with bringing up a new technology only. Besides, were formulated a number of schemes to liberate the scavengers from their degrading occupation, to bring them into the mainstream of the society by providing them opportunity, to be engaged in alternative



employment, imparting vocational training, quality education and attempting upgradation of the status socially by persuading the elite to have social interaction with them.

At Sulabh's initiative a meeting was organised in March 1981 in which participated representatives of the Ministries of Works and Housing and Home Affairs of the Central Government and representatives of the Government of Bihar. It was decided in the meeting that a comprehensive scheme should be introduced in the selected small and medium towns on the whole town approach basis by conversion of the existing dry latrines into water pour flush latrines. The scavengers so liberated were to be given alternative and dignified employment without any loss of income and any time gap after giving them some vocational training. The scheme was started in March 1981 in the two towns of Bihar. The scheme was subsequently taken up in other states as well. The scheme worked well in all the states.

A basket of schemes has been formulated by Government which is a mixture of training programmes with stipends and grants for setting up employment oriented projects with varying components of loan, subsidy and margin money etc. The primary objective of the scheme is to wean away the scavengers from their demeaning task and to rehabilitate them and to convert the bucket privies to the flushing system on Sulabh model. Of 7 lac scavengers about 50% have been rehabilitated. The implementation of the schemes, however, has been rather tardy and hardly 13% of the privies were converted by the end of 8th plan period.

The problem is gigantic. The number of households in urban areas alone without any toilet facility is nearly 14 million. The main reasons for the slow progress of the scheme are inadequate subsidy, no financial assistance for superstructure, the loan amount being small and general apathy of the state Govts. towards this programme. The local bodies cannot avail of loans because the municipal finances are in poor shape and most of the

local bodies cannot be funded without state guarantee. There is need for the involvement of NGOs like Sulabh, user education and motivation (IEC).

Sulabh International Social Service Organisation, which is a non-profit voluntary organisation working in 26 states and 3 union Territories, 1019 local bodies, 1050 towns and 400 districts, has constructed more than a million Sulabh Shauchalayas all over the country in addition to about 6,000 pay and use community toilets which are used by 10 million people daily. Sulabh has liberated 60,000 scavengers from the demeaning practice of manual scavenging, provided vocational training set up English Medium Public School for scavengers' children at New Delhi and installed 118 biogas plants for generation of energy and bio-fertilizer.

The practice of manual scavenging in India violates the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, adopted and proclaimed by the General Assembly of the United Nations on December 10, 1948, the preamble of which speaks of recognition of the inherent dignity and of equal and inalienable rights of all members of the human family which is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world” The scavengers who have been made untouchables and slaves in their own country, need protection under the Charter. It is hoped that this practice will be abolished soon. That even fifty five years after independence, the inhuman and degrading practice of manual scavenging of night-soil is still prevalent, in certain parts of the country, is an affront to human dignity and a social evil.

The crucial issue of right to live with dignity has now been taken up in the country by the National Human Rights Commission which has urged all the State Governments to take urgent steps to eliminate this practice and to rehabilitate scavengers by 2<sup>nd</sup> October, 2003.

One can forget about the past and have the satisfaction of not feeling responsible for what has happened but what is worrying is the present continuous if I may say so. For, it is this which determines the future scenario. But, I am sure, with arising awareness, will of the Government and the efforts of the NGOs the situation which is improving, is bound to

improve further. I hope till such time the scourge of scavenging becomes a bad dream.

