



# Relevance of Caste Identity in Manual Scavenging and Stigma

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## Abstract

The paper deals with the problem of manual scavenging in India as form of caste and occupation based on caste-based exclusion. In India, Dalits are placed lowest in the caste hierarchy. People who belong to lower caste are forced to do unclean jobs. The practice of manual scavenging in public and private dry toilets and open drains continue in several parts of India. India's central government has approved legislative policy efforts to end manual scavenging. Because these policies are not implemented properly, people who are engaged in this job they face serious social pressure. People who work as manual scavengers that work is not accepted as designated work, which is associated with particular caste and it, carry the social stigma that they are unclean or 'untouchable'. In India scavengers and sweeper still carry out the basic sanitary services in cities and town. Indian society has been exploitative, unfair and unjust to the weakest among the weak. Caste is a prominent base of inequality.

**Keywords:** Caste, Scavenging, Exclusion, Dalits, Occupation.

## Introduction

The need for the disposal of waste and rubbish in the Indian cities and villages has resulted in the creation of the special castes, the scavenging castes.<sup>1</sup> It is really difficult to say when exactly this profession of scavengers took its origin. In ancient India when the pressure of population was very much less and when there were only a few cities worth the name this profession did not assume any serious proportions. Only when the population grew and big cities came to existence. The problem of maintaining the sanitation of towns and cities arose. It becomes necessary to keep the towns and cities clean. The removal of dirt and garbage and human excreta was a very dirty job. The so-called upper castes of Hindu society consider this job not only below their dignity to do but also a job not to be done by the upper caste. Since the so-called upper castes of Hindus Society were not supposed to do the job of sweeping and scavenging, they naturally assigned the filthy work to the 'untouchables' who were socially and economically oppressed. It is understood that these people who took to the profession of sweeping and scavenging had no other alternative because all other profession were closed to them. The only profession which they could

<sup>1</sup> Fuchs, Stephen, 1981, *At the Bottom of Society: The Harijan and other Low Castes*, New Delhi, Munshi Ram Manohar Lal Publications.

easily take up without competition was that of sweeping and scavenging. Society at large also wanted that this filthy work could be done only by these unwanted people. The caste Hindus in order to maintain their superior position in the hierarchy exercises various restrictions on religious and ritual functions. It is believed that people who do filthy work that they are impure and if they enter at worship places it will impure the places of worship So to keep them pure people from scheduled caste were not permitted to enter temples. They were kept away from the so-called pure places. Government has made law to abolish the practice of the society and government has made law to abolish the practice but this does not mean that the traditional practice has been done away with now.

### **Living conditions of manual scavengers**

The caste system in India has been the root cause for many social evils. It is difficult to say when the practice of untouchability originated. The 'untouchables' were segregated from the main stream of social life. They were forced to live outside village and town limits well away from other castes. After the country became free from foreign domination it was hoped that many of the evils that were existed in social structure of India would disappear and that there would be a better and more acceptable mode of life for oppressed communities and sections of the society. But unfortunately, this has remained only a dream. Those who have taken up the profession of sweeping and scavenging belong mostly to the Scheduled Castes community. In many parts of the state the sweepers and scavengers are forced to live separately away from other sections of Scheduled Caste because of the stigma attached to the profession. Unwanted and undesired by their other community the sweepers and scavengers have given up all hopes. The social segregation from rest of communities has made them develop a diffident outlook on life.

### **Scavenging: A Caste Occupation**

The association between caste and occupation is not a new phenomenon. Caste is linked with Occupation that together exists in traditional societies particularly among Hindus society. It exists since ages and it is there in the beginning of the Hindu Varna system. The Varna system clearly divides the different castes that have specific duties and role to play. Caste system in India has survived for hundreds of years. It is system in which people are classified according to their birth in the society. Scavengers are the lowest among the low. They suffer from discrimination. They carry the stigma of untouchability since ages. Scavengers are discriminated by orthodox Hindus. The Brahminical origin of caste system has been greatly emphasised. The whole caste system as it has come down to us, bears unmistakable evidence of Brahminical origin. The priests were therefore strongest advocates of caste system. They applied the principle of exclusion/inclusion vigorously to strengthen their position in society. Such a process of selection/ rejection resulted into diversification of caste, occupational and ritual structure, caste is being considered to be a tyrannical system. The British Government did not discourage the malfunctioning of the system but rather encouraged its distorted continuity by according higher status to certain group, granting titles, land etc. In the British period social mobility particularly among the lower castes were so weak that they could not be considered an attack on the atrocities of the caste system. The system was never based on universalistic principles of division of labour, justice, equality and dignity of work. The British in India discouraged the continuity of the functions of the caste system. The mass-poverty, mass-illiteracy and mass-unemployed/underemployment are distinctive characteristics of an underdeveloped society. The dalit condition is that of destitution and

dehumanization. Dalits have been treated as out castes declared ritually unclean hence, untouchables: and pushed out for fear of pollution to live on the outskirts of villages, hence segregated.

In traditional society a particular section is ordained to do scavenging work. It has been a hereditary occupation and everybody born in the sub caste of scavenger (Bhangi) male or female is destined to take up this sub-human profession. Manual scavenging has not been seen as employment in our society it is a hereditary occupation. Dr. Baba Sahib Ambedkar had said that “our society is like multi-storeyed pyramid and there are no stairs or doors for entering into these storeys. One has to die in the storey in which one is born.” The members of a particular community would continue to engage in occupations of their ancestors a far cry from any modern notion of decent employment.

There is notion of purity and pollution in caste system. There many reasons in Indian society that particular caste is discriminated by other caste in the name of purity and pollution. There are many ways to explain purity and pollution. Notion of purity and pollution is very complex. The notion purity and pollution only exist in Hindu society. There are other societies which have the same notion in different forms. One of the greatest problems that have to be tackled in our country is sanitation. In the process of socialization, the feeling of ‘inferiority and superiority’, upper and lower’ have been internalised right from the beginning at home as well as outside. The label of purity and pollution is attributed to occupations as well as people. The social, economic and ritual factors are adopted in the determining the prestige of an occupation, particularly in India. This concept of purity and pollution is deeply entrenched among different caste, religious groups, and regions. In Indian society high status is associated with purity and low status with pollution. Even some sociologist has described caste system on the basis of pure and impure binary. For example, Dumont (1980)<sup>2</sup> believes that the notion of purity and pollution are two main fundamental binary oppositions which described the structure of caste system in India further legitimized this distinction to wider social ordering and meanings in the society. A sweeper caste on the contrary considered to be born inherently polluted. It is believed that his touch and shadow will defile the status of an upper caste or more precisely Brahmin caste. They are traditionally associated with the occupation of cleaning removing of the human excreta from the latrines, cleaning public places and lanes and gathering all the waste materiel and dumb it in the garbage heap. Garbage dumping worker play a vital role in our life. They are the one who cleans our shit and make our city beautiful and hygienic. It is they who bear all the torturous and unhygienic life and in return they do not get anything. They are seen as untouchables and sometimes people embarrassed them for their work. Thekaekare (2003)<sup>3</sup> while referring to Ambedkar, argues that scavengers and Bhangis are at the bottom of the heap. They are placed at the lowest in the system of graded inequality. They are called different names in different states such as Bhangis, Valmiki, Totthi, Paki, Madiga, Mahter and Chuhar. They are doing this work for centuries and held the monopoly over this work. But when it comes to government job, they are raising voice for their reservation. There is as such no development in this area. They used to clean the waste with crude and most primitive tools, mostly a stick broom and a tin plate. They have to carry garbage sacks on their shoulder and head to the dumping ground. Now days they get wheel-barrow and cart. They usually settle in the outskirts of villages and while in the city they

<sup>2</sup> Louise Dumont(1980), *Homo Hierarchicus*; the Caste System and Implications, University of Chicago.

<sup>3</sup> Thekaekara, Mary.Marcel (1999), *Endless Filth; The saga of Bhangis*, publication: London New York.

live in Jhuggi jhopdi (JJC). They also face a different kind of exclusion within the Dalit community as the other Dalit belongs to non-sweeping castes do not interact with them. These communities are struggling from both the side for example from the mainstream and from their own Dalit community itself. This caste is suffering from every conceivable form of harassment, socio-political discrimination, economic exploitation and social exclusion.

### Root cause of scavenging in India

In his study “*Road to Freedom: A Sociological Study on the Abolition of Scavenging in India*”, Dr. Bindeshwar pathak has shown that some form of removing night-soil has existed in different countries, but that it has also fast disappeared. He says “Before the coming water closet, the sewage of European cities was disposed of by scavengers, men who made nightly rounds of the cities collecting the contents of privy vaults and carting them to nearby farming areas. Often the farmer who brought his produce to the city returned home with a load of fertilizer. This was also the customs in America, where the widespread introduction of water closets and the sewerage system occurred only late in the century”. With the development of higher technology and the possibility of water supply in sufficient quantity in all places, the practice of scavenging came to an end in these countries. In India, however, this practice has continued to exist unabated, till today. A question we should address ourselves why is it the practice of scavenging, which has disappeared in other parts of world is still being carried in this country.

The issue of the emancipation of scavengers is in fact tied up with caste system. The social group recognized as *Shudra* has the peculiarity that it embraces a whole range of sub-group. It has different role and status in Indian society. The four-fold division of society *Brahmin, Kshtriya, Vaisya* and *Shudra* have been described as the *Chaturvarnya* system of social organization. It is believed that the invading condemned the vanquished original inhabitants as *Shudras*. The *Shudras* was the only provider bodily labour and hence condemned to a position of servitude forever. It seems that those who had easily accepted the subjugation of the Aryans are known as backward classes. But those who had put stiff resistance before giving up were branded as *Dasyus* and were put in the category of untouchables. Besides the aforesaid fourfold division of society there were other groups of persons who have come to described as ‘*Antyajas*’, ‘*Pariahs*’, ‘*Atishudras*’ i.e. untouchables, and in modern context as ‘Depressed classes’ and ‘Scheduled Castes’. The untouchables formed the fifth Varna or ‘Fifth Caste’ in the society. They were assigned a position much worse than that of the *Shudra*. They were considered outcastes. Their main occupation sanctioned by the system was that removing skins from dead animals, street-sweeping, shoe-making, scavenging and preparing leather articles. They were condemned to more arduous and hateful tasks even carrying the night-soil on their head. People in upper strata of society discerned a need for the continued existence of this class rendering them an essential service. So that the scavengers may continue to provide these services, they were deprived of all and every opportunity of social and economic upliftment and earn their livelihood only by their hereditary profession. And these sanctions as finally evolved and established were supported on the two planes of rebirth and fatalism popularly known as transmigration of soul and predetermination respectively. This had made the redemption of these unfortunate millions impossible. They were born as untouchable; they lived and died as untouchables. These communities do not constitute a socially homogeneous single group. This group is a conglomeration of a number of different castes and communities. Among all the traditional lower or untouchable

caste in India the 'Bhangi' (scavengers) occupies the lower or untouchable caste and communities. The upward mobility is closed for the lowest stratum the Untouchable.

### **Legislation on Abolishing Scavenging**

Parliament passed the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry-latrines (prohibition) Bill, 1993 to abolish scavenging and ban the construction of dry latrines. This was a major decision taken by government of India without any time limit. In which problem of manual scavenging would be totally abolished but the purpose of the bill failed. The Government of India has constituted a seven- member National Commission for Safai Karamcharis under the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis Act, 1993 In August 1994. The tenure of the Commission is to recommend to the Central Government specific programmes of action towards elimination of inequalities in status, facilities and opportunities for Safai Karamcharis under a time-bound action plan. The implementation of the programmes and schemes is related to the social and economic rehabilitation of Safai Karamcharis. In spite of many commission and committees including the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis set up in 1997 but degrading practice of manual scavenging is still continuing.

### **Commissions and Committees**

After Independence the Government of India paid attention to this problem. In 1953 the Backward classes Kaka Kalelkar Commission was set up by the Ministry of Home Affairs. The Commission observed that manually cleaning of night- soil should be obviate by mechanical cleaning of latrines and provision of sewers, drains etc. on a large-scale training in cleanliness and hygiene and provision of better housing would improve their living standard and help them absorption in the society. A similar approach was suggested by Scavenging Conditions Enquiry Committee (Malkani Committee 1960) which observed that "as long as dry latrines continue; the problem will exist and it is a story of the far distant future to think of all the towns having underground sewers." The problem of scavengers was also examined by the various working groups constituted by the planning commission for the development of Scheduled Caste and Tribes during successive Five-Year plans. The recommendation of all these working groups was that a time bound programme should be taken up to convert all dry-latrines in the country within a period of 4 to 5 years. The question of providing low-cost sanitation was also discussed in the committees. In 1967 with commencement of the Gandhi Centenary Year the emphasis was on emancipation of scavengers. The Government provided 25 percent subsidy and 75 percent lon to be accounted for in easy instalments for converting dry-latrines into a water flush toilet and its connection to public sewer line. The Government of India made another effort in 1968 by promoting a special campaign for conversion of dry-latrines into water flush units with the objective of relieving the scavengers from their present occupation.

- (i) It was suggested that no new building should be allowed to be constructed without water flush latrine.
- (ii) Where sewers are available the dry latrines after conversion should be compulsory connected to them and this should be legally enforced.
- (iii) In the unsewered areas, septic tanks or leach pits should be provided for converting dry-latrines into water flush units.

## The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Bill, 2012

The “Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Bill, 2012” was introduced in Lok Sabha on 3 September 2012. It was also felt that the existing laws were not effective to eradicate manual scavenging. There was need a comprehensive and stringent provision for the prohibition of insanitary latrines and employment of persons as manual scavengers, rehabilitation of manual scavengers and their families and their families and to discontinue the hazardous manual cleaning of sewers and septic tanks by the use of technology and for the matters connected therewith.<sup>4</sup>

The salient features of the Bill are as under:

- i) Prohibition of manual scavenging and rehabilitation of manual scavengers.
- ii) Prohibition of insanitary latrines, which include such latrines where human excreta need to be cleaned or other-wise handled manually.
- iii) The definition of manual scavengers has been widened to include a person engaged or employed in manual cleaning of human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit, railway tracks etc.
- iv) Express provision for identification of manual scavengers and insanitary latrines.
- v) Prohibition of hazardous manual cleaning of septic tanks and sewer so as to ensure that health and safety of such workers is not compromised.
- vi) More stringent penal provisions for contravention of the Act; and
- vii) Vigilance and monitoring Committees at the sub-division, district, state and Central levels.<sup>5</sup>

The elimination of dry latrines and manual scavenging and the rehabilitation of manual scavengers in alternate occupation has been the high priority for the Government. Despite the concerted efforts made in the past to eliminate the dehumanizing practice of manual scavenging, the practice of manual scavenging the practice still persists in various parts of the country. Existing laws have not proved adequate in eliminating the twin evils of the country. These evils are inconsistent with the right to live with dignity which an essence of Fundamental Rights is guaranteed in part III of the Constitution.

The scavengers are not only required to do the dirty work for the society but they are also subjected to various forms of exploitation and disabilities. Their work remains menial in the eye of society. Their wages are lowest of all employed people and they are generally not acceptable on equal footing in society. A new form of exploitation exists in the recent practice of non-scheduled castes securing job of scavengers, pocketing the salaries and earning promotion and the benefits, and managing to get the work done by the hereditary scavengers. This profession is violation of human rights. Human rights violation is global phenomena. India is country of ‘unity of diversity’ witness of violations almost every day. Scavengers are discriminated because of their profession with all facilities.

<sup>4</sup> “The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation” Bill, 2012” Statement of Objects and Reasons”.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

Employing manual scavenging is illegal under the law. Manual scavengers themselves do not speak out of this because of shame and losing his main source of livelihood.

## Conclusion

This section analyses the issue of representation of one of the most marginalized sections of Indian society. The term Dalit has been used as ex-untouchables in Indian society. They are constitutionally known as scheduled castes. They are excluded sphere of their life. Hence, they occupied different status in society. The status of Dalits stigmatized with their traditional occupation which they serve to other caste. Social exclusion is multi-dimensional process in which Dalits are excluded in various stages of their life. They are excluded in employment, political participation and culture process. Dalits have long history of social exclusion in India. They have been excluded from various reasons. We can argue that poor may be economically and politically excluded but not excluded from social and culture spaces. But Dalits are excluded from in all three section; social, economic and political realms. If Dalits attain social and political recognition and representation, it is not accepted by upper caste. Their social identity never gets away. They are always stigmatized by their identity.

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