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# Throwing off the yoke of manual scavenging

*Vidya Subrahmaniam (The Hindu, Oct 27, 2010)*

In this July 7, 2010 photo, a sewerage worker clears a choked drain at Anandnagar, Hyderabad.
Photo: Mohammed Yousuf

***The obnoxious practice will continue in one form or the other, as long as the government and society treat certain so-called menial jobs as the preserve of one community.***

On November 1, a unique journey will come to a ceremonious end in Delhi. Earlier this month, five bus loads of men and women headed out from different corners of the country with one slogan on their lips: honour and liberation for those still trapped in the horror of manual scavenging.

When the protesters (most of them former manual scavengers) set out on their mission, they knew that the Samajjik Parivartan Yatra (national rally for social transformation) would have to be more than a petition to the government. A comprehensive rehabilitation package was undoubtedly at the core of the yatra's demands. But there was equally another objective: To motivate the remaining members of the scavenging community to throw off the yoke — on their own, without waiting for a package. Bezwada Wilson, convenor of the Safai Karamacharis Andolan (SKA) and the brain behind the rally, explains the concept of self-liberation: “Manual scavenging is a blot on humanity, and if you engage in it, it is a crime you commit on yourself. So, don't wait for the government, break free.”

Given the depth of emotion in this message, it will be a double crime if the government does not do everything in its power to hasten the process of liberation. Perhaps that is why, on October 25, the Sonia Gandhi-led National Advisory Council proposed a far-reaching package of reforms to end the practice. Nonetheless, the irony is inescapable. Sixty-three years after Independence, India is still debating the best way to lift manual scavengers out of their collective misery.

Mr. Wilson was a young boy when his family in Karnataka sent him away to study in a school across the border in Andhra Pradesh. He came home for holidays but felt out of place in a community whose defining feature was the uncontrolled violence of its menfolk. It was the early 1970s and they lived in a large, grimy neighbourhood around the edges of the Kolar Gold township. The evenings were always the same. The men would get into a drunken rage and assault the women senseless. The pattern of male aggression and female submission was common to most feudal, patriarchal societies, but even by this yardstick, the violence was excessive.

The teenager knew he had been born to a family of sweepers. The local school he went to as a child was segregated and was known by a swear word. But that still did not explain the anger that erupted around him. His father, a retired government employee, and his brother, mysteriously employed in an unnamed place, stonewalled his questions. Determined, the boy followed his brother to his workplace, where the horror of manual scavenging hit him like a million lashes.

Mr. Wilson learnt that he and his family were part of a huge community of manual scavengers that serviced the Kolar Gold township. They physically lifted and carried human excreta from the township's network of dry latrines. He could now see where the violence came from. But he could also see the unfairness of it all on the women who formed 85 per cent of the manual scavenging workforce. The women of his community were victims thrice over: they were outcasts even among Dalits; they were despised and shunned for the work they did, and they were physically abused by the men who saw the beatings as an outlet for their frustrations.

The employment of humans to clean human faeces was unarguably the worst violation of human rights anywhere in the world. The degrading act stripped the individual of her dignity while the constant handling of excreta brought in its wake crippling illnesses and infections that went untreated because the community bore the cross of untouchability. Over the next decade-and-a-half, Mr. Wilson worked at educating the elders and spreading awareness about the dehumanising aspect of their occupation. But it was difficult to organise a community that was simply unprepared to give up its job.

This was a baffling paradox. On the one hand, there was the daily ritual of the men drinking and getting violent to forget the pain and humiliation of manual scavenging. At the same time, there was a sense of ownership about the job. “It is our job,” they told Mr. Wilson, vastly complicating his effort simultaneously to organise them, fight the company management that employed them, and push the government towards banning the occupation and rehabilitating the workers.

Mr. Wilson told *The Hindu*, “Our people had internalised their oppression. They saw themselves as a condemned lot, it was their fate, they had to do this work.” If the manual scavenging community, now included among the safai karamcharis (sweepers) to diminish the ugliness of the act, owned up its work due to an acute lack of self-worth, those higher in the caste hierarchy compounded the injury by perpetuating the myth that toilet cleaning and allied activities, like sweeping and picking up garbage, could only be done by the valmiki Dalits, also known as dom, hela, hadi, arundatiyar, madiga, relli, pakhis, chekilliyars, etc.

Incredibly, the ridiculous notion prevailed even at the level of governments — and it continues to prevail — with job reservation for the Scheduled Castes translating as the Dalit castes forming the majority of workforce in Class IV and lower categories. Whatever the official explanation for this, this was nothing if not the Varna system by diktat.

The insensitivity of officialdom to manual scavenging can be seen from the length of time it took India to formally ban the practice. The Constitution abolished untouchability once and for all in 1950. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, which prescribed punishments for untouchability, followed in 1955, and The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act came in 1989. But manual scavenging, which is untouchability at its most violent, was prohibited by legislation only in 1993. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act came into force 46 years after Independence.

Far worse, manual scavenging continues to this day, with many Central and State government departments themselves employing manual scavengers in violation of the 1993 Act. The worst offender in this respect has been the Union Ministry of Railways: the open discharge system of toilets in train carriages results in excreta having to be manually lifted off the tracks. Many municipalities too continue to use dry latrines.

In 2003, the Supreme Court directed all the State governments to file affidavits on manual scavenging, taking a serious view of a PIL petition filed by the SKA and 18 other social action groups. The Uttar Pradesh government admitted to the practice as did the Railway Ministry. But most other State governments brazenly lied that their States were "free from manual scavenging." The SKA, which has an entire library devoted to the documentation of the practice, has clinching photographs and data that establish the lie. The Andolan estimates that there are currently over 3 lakh manual scavengers, down from 13 lakh a decade ago. However, it attributes the declining numbers as much to voluntary liberation as to official intervention.

So far, manual scavenging has been tackled at two levels: The conversion of dry latrines into pour-flush toilets and the rehabilitation of those engaged in the practice. The rehabilitation itself has been terribly half-hearted; a shocking report in *The Hindu* shows that the district administration in Ambala fired manual scavengers it had re-employed as sweepers. The crucial issue, therefore, is a vital third element: the de-stigmatisation of the so-called menial jobs via changes in recruitment patterns and policies. Without this overhaul, manual scavenging will continue in one form or another.

It is also necessary to expand the definition of manual scavenging to include other kinds of unhygienic toilet cleaning. The Union Ministry of Housing and Urban Poverty Alleviation has been overseeing the elimination of dry latrines since 2004. According to the Ministry, the numbers of dry latrines have declined from a total of 6 lakh in six States to about 2.4 lakh in Uttar Pradesh, Bihar and Uttarakhand.

But significantly the Ministry makes the point that while dry latrines may be on their way out, this does not necessarily mean the end of manual cleaning of excreta. A recent paper prepared by HUPA says that in the poorer areas in many towns and cities, the dry latrines have given way to "bahao" latrines. These are not connected to septic tanks or underground pits but flow out directly into open drainage, resulting in the "sludge and excreta" having to be manually removed. Says the paper: "These unsanitary latrines require continuous cleaning, which is done by municipal staff and almost always manually, with the most rudimentary appliances."

And no prizes for guessing which castes form the municipal staff. As Union Minister for HUPA Kumari Selja says: "It is ultimately about attitudes. As long as society treats toilet cleaning and sweeping as menial jobs to be done only by certain members of the caste system, it will be difficult to end the obnoxious practice. The scavenging and sweeping community will be truly liberated when cleaning jobs become respectable with the workforce drawn from all communities."

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