



AN OVERVIEW OF SCAVENGERS PROBLEM: MEANS TO REFORM

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ABSTRACT

India is the only country in the world where only a particular section of the society is traditionally responsible for keeping the habitation clean by removing human excreta through primitive methods. This is a disgrace to the country. Instances are not rare even today when one can see people carrying night-soil on their heads in the buckets or removing human excreta by physical touch. Who are these people? Why they are compelled to do such type of inhuman and dirty work and how long these neglected sections of the society will remain under heavy bondage and is there any solution to liberate them before they enter twenty first century? These are some of the complex questions which are agitating the minds of the people in the country. The country which won freedom from the slavery of the British people 44 years ago but could not liberate from human bondage more than half million people who are called Bhangis, Mehtars, Balmikis etc. and still engaged in their traditional occupation of sweeping and scavenging. Is it not a shame on us when we force a person to clean excreta of others?

KEYWORDS: Scavengers, Safai-workers, Occupation, Caste

INTRODUCTION

Scavengers are not a single caste in Indian social system traditionally and instead is a product of the urban social system as an occupational group. Agrarian society was largely based on self-reliance and mutual cooperation and did not condemn any one self-reliance status. Those who did dirty jobs lived outside the village and were considered non-citizens.

Scavengers, i.e. cleaning of latrines, road, public places and carrying of night-soil are a need of an urban society and hence the scavengers an occupational group emerged in cities. Gradually the occupation became hereditary and later it degenerated into a socially condemned out caste-caste group.

Bhangi's function was an ingredient part of occupational structure of the medieval city. The work had to be done manually with a few crude implement and night-soil, dirt and filth had to be carried on head. Hence, these practices condemned the workers to a sub-human subsistence.

Gandhiji was concerned with the uplift and emancipation of all people in the lower rung of the society. These included the manual workers, service functionaries and those engaged in low occupations. Bhangis as the lowest amongst the low were his first concern. Gandhiji said the function of the Bhangi is akin to the function of the mother who cleans and sweeps the house, clean the soiled clothes and body of children and is always ready to clean all that is unclean in the house. Gandhiji himself cleaned the latrines in the Ashram and expected his other Ashramites to join him.

In modern society there is a complete change in the concept and technology of civic sanitation. We have flush latrines (even with auto-wash facilities), underground sewers with pressure water to flush the drains and sewers, machines to eject dirt and filth from sewers, automatic sewerage disposal plants, water-recycling units and sewerage drying, packing and reprocessing plants for making them useful reusable material. This is no more a manual, dirty, sub-human work on occupation in

technological societies. It has become a highly technical job employing high level of technology, modern equipment and gadgets and qualified personnel. It is becoming a skilled-technical occupation will it remain, then a condemned occupation? Will only those who have been doing it through generations alone will done it? The answer is no experience in western industrial countries, in airlines, railways transport and industry adequately prove that members of all social strata do sanitation jobs.

This requires a two-fold strategy-first elimination of the need of manual scavenging and instead introducing technology and automation in tasks relating to scavenging and sewerage disposal. Secondly, to raise the socio-economic status of the scavenger's caste/class for which purpose their educational and skill levels should be improved and they should be encouraged and skill levels should be improved and they should be encouraged to enter into alternative occupations.

Thus, an integrated developed plan for the community and the people will have to be adopted, raising their education, technological skills and abilities, outflow from traditional habitats, occupational mobility and economic betterment.

ELIMINATION OF THE NEED OF MANUAL SCAVENGING

In all towns and villages flush latrines-manually or pressure flushed should be set up. In rural areas biogas plants, individual or community owned, should be set up and it should be made obligatory for every panchayat under the panchayat Raj Act to ensure that every village has its network of community latrines connected to a biogas plant. The State government and the Ministries of Environment and Health should financially contribute to this work.

This is a stupendous task involving lakhs of villages and affecting the habits of crores of people. However, those going to the fields for call or natures should be encouraged to adopt "Khurpi" as advocated by village sanitation as an important ingredient of their programme.

In the urban areas, service latrines should be strictly ruled out. In town and cities where a sewerage system does exist, service latrines requiring manual removal of night-soil should be declared illegal and it should be obligatory for every house-owner to connect his outlet for waste and night-soil to the community/ city sewer.

In urban areas those who connect their sewers to the municipal sewerage system have to pay a sewerage tax. What a shame? In fact, an incentive amount/ or service should be provided to all these households connecting their waste lines to the municipal sewers. This can be in the form of municipal connection free of cost of one drain from each house.

A pre-requisite for flush latrines is adequate water supply in urban areas and villages. World

Bank is giving assistance for drinking water supply to rural and also urban areas. In calculating water requirements for flush latrines should also be taken into account.

EFFICIENT PUBLIC LATRINES SYSTEM-NATIONAL SULABH EXPERIMENT

Public Latrines had been construction even during the British period in cities and town but these were only in low classes areas and very few in number. These were always filthy places constructed near colonies or squatter settlements of sweepers and the open areas around these latrines were used more for purpose of defecation than these latrines. These were never serviced regularly, even daily. Hence these became spots of filth in the area.

Sulabh experiment is a revolution in the sphere of public sanitary system. It is multipurpose project providing clean healthy facilities for easing oneself, scientific disposal of night-soil, disposal of waste, and producing gas for street lighting and manure. The processed water, and producing gas for street lighting and manure. The processed water can be easily disposed off for agricultural purposes.

The need is to take this movement to every city. Town and village of the country. It should develop as a people's movement, local groups in villages and town should be formed to construct and maintain these community latrines and baths. The central organisation should act as a promoting and consultative agency. Besides, it should have a Research and Development and Training Institute to train people in technical managerial and mass mobilization and action skills for the community health action.

MECHANIZATION OF SEWERAGE SERVICE SYSTEM

There is need of automation and mechanization of not only latrines in home and communities the whole town-sanitation system needs to be mechanized to remove the manual filth concept. Roads and streets should be cleaned with improved brooms and the sweepers should be provided rubber-shoes, overalls, gloves, pull carts and face covers. Waste and filth collected at places should be transferred to trollies which can be toed away by small tillers or trucks or dumpers depending upon the quantum of waste, width of the streets and the distance to which they are to be taken. The waste should be mechanically sorted and disposed off accordingly for filling low lying areas and waste reprocessing units for plastic, paper, glass, bricks, steel units, etc.

For cleaning of sewers, machines should be used and assistance should be given to municipalities and voluntary agencies to undertake these tasks.

RAISING OF SKILLS AND WAGES OF SAFAI WORKERS

Wages of sanitation workers should be raised, commensurate with the hazardous nature of their work and the skills required for doing these operations. They should be treated as semi-skilled workers. Besides, promotional avenues, opportunities for skills improvement, employment benefits, preventions against occupational hazards and disease, social security, family welfare, should be made available. Channel of promotion for *safai* workers should be defined and they should be helped through informal education, skill training to move up in the hierarchy of sanitation and health workers-going up to sanitary inspectors, vaccinations, and supervisors and officers in hospitals, nursing homes, and in plants for reprocessing of sewerage, water, and waste materials. They should also be trained and educated to divert to technical-professional jobs in industry and services.

INTEGRATED DEVELOPMENT OF SCAVENGER'S COMMUNITY

Scavengers are drawn from various scheduled castes and communities in Indian society-Bhangis, Khakorb, Bahishti, Domes, etc. All of them may not remove night-soil but they are engaged in cleaning roads, streets, removing waste, streets, removing waste, cleaning sewers, driving waste-dirt, night-soil trucks, carts, dead-animals, etc. Ethnically they may belong to different backgrounds, but their occupations are all connected with removing the waste-filth of the society.

They are all "dirty" because of their functions and are "untouchables" because of their occupation. Culturally, economically, educationally and socially they are deprived, lagging in the process of social change, poor, ignorant, helpless and even socially oppressed. An integrated approach to their development has to be adopted. They have to be emancipated from the chains of ignorance, poverty and deprivations.

Components of integrated development are informal education, conscientization, raising expectations, formal education facilities for children and young, special residential institution for those living in unfavourable circumstances, training in new skills for occupational upward mobility, spatial mobility, greater employment opportunities in health, sanitation, and industries, education of girls and young women, non-formal education and organization of housewives, extensive family welfare and family counselling and enabling services, promotion of self-employment in such areas as in household arts and crafts, alienation from drinking and use of drugs, substitution of piggery gradually with cattle rearing and animals husbandry.

Scavenger's communities should be adopted by elite and social groups such as Rotary, Inner Wheel, Lions, Junior Chambers, etc. for development and welfare as a part of their service programme.

How this integrated development can take place, what are the programmes and activities that will have to be promoted, are a subject of a separate paper. It will be relevant to say that efforts for providing equal opportunities of survival, living, education, employment and cultural development can take place, what are the programmes and activities that will have to be promoted, are a subject of a separate paper. It will be relevant to say that efforts for providing equal opportunities of survival, living, education, employment and cultural development should be available to them. This is the responsibility of the society and the state. However, it is also essential that these deprived people have to organize themselves for claiming their own place in society.

OCCUPATIONAL MOBILITY

Scavengers show very little occupational mobility even though a large majority of them are in urban areas and where they have abundant opportunities of education, training, alternative employment outside the closed employment ring of scavenging and cleaning. This can be seen through various studies of occupational pattern of scavengers. One such study was conducted by Shyam Lal in the city of Jodhpur.

In a total sample of 557 respondents 74.50 percent were scavengers; 6.3 percent were labourers in earth work, bone collecting, road making, construction work, etc., 5.3 percent were office peons, gatemen, helpers, messengers, cleaners, Bhistis, Farash; 2.42 percent were watchmen, waiters, male guards, gangmen, notice distributors; 1.47 percent were manufacturing brooms; 5.79 percent were skilled manual workers; 1.07 percent were in administrative posts and school-teachers; 0.30 percent were small business; 2.61 percent were in highly skilled or supervisor manual work; and 0.39 percent were in high professions as law, college teachers, in medicine etc.

A similar survey of households of scavengers in Varanasi showed that over 92 percent were scavengers and only one was a clerk, and another was a mechanic. Three percent of them were drivers of municipal trucks carrying city waste and filth.

Survey of families of Bhangis in Ludhiana town showed that only 42 percent of the earning members were scavengers and of the rest a large number of them had taken job in industries, government services, railways and transport services. In municipal health department some were employed as sanitary inspector, vaccinators, and operators of machines for cleaning of sewers. Some were drivers of trucks and dumpers used for carrying city refuse and of water tankers.

A very important component in strategy for improvement in their socio-economic-conditions is shifting of scavenger's population to industrial employment and public sector clerical, mechanical, educational and civil services. For this, special

efforts should be made for their education and vocational training.

CONCLUSION

The success of a development programme depends upon the active participation by the people concerned at all levels- at the level of demand, organization, protest, planning of services, staffing, directing, control, beneficiary and assessment levels. Development should not be an action by those who have, for those who are have-nots.

The scavengers must become aware of their conditions, problems and needs must voice their grievances and protest against deprivation, exploitation and handicaps and organise themselves to promote action for the eradication of impediments in their development. This can, many a times, result in struggle against vested interests, oppressors and exploiters, but this struggle should be non-violent, though firm and strong.

The oppressed must rise as an organised force, as the vanguard of their own development. This power of the oppressed, violated, exploited needs to emerge and become strong. It cannot be made to emerge by state action but its emergence can be ensured by eliminating obstacles in its way. Social reformers and professional social workers can play a facilitating role through their skills.

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