

Swachh Bharat Abhiyan and the challenge of Manual Scavenging

Swapnil Dhanraj

Abstract

The much celebrated Swachh Bharat Abhiyan by the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) completes its third year in 2017. Though the BJP leadership enthusiastically continues to promote the cleanliness campaign, its silence on the practice of manual scavenging raises a serious doubt about its commitment towards making India clean in coming years. It is in this context that, the paper argues that eradication of manual scavenging is the most important step to achieve the objectives of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. It argues that the aim of clean India would remain impossible without eradication of manual scavenging in India.

Keywords: Clean India, discrimination, exclusion, caste occupation, manual scavenging

The day everyone in India gets a toilet to use, I shall know that our country has reached the pinnacle of progress (Jawaharlal Nehru).¹

1. Introduction

When Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (Clean India Mission) in 2014 it fascinated many people in the country. The ambitious mission, which aims at making India ‘clean’, has one more goal of elimination of open defecation. The event of launching the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan will also remain memorable since it was introduced on 145th birth anniversary of Mahatma Gandhi. The campaign that spread like the wind took no time to reach to the common masses since some charismatic personalities and actors from Bollywood came to the street to praise and support the campaign, including the mainstream media. However, the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan received criticism that it doesn’t not deal with and address the problem of manual scavenging and deeply ingrained discrimination in the heinous practice. Some criticised it for being a political campaign to woo the communities which are the victims of the practice of manual scavenging. For some, it was merely a

¹ The Collected Speeches of Jawaharlal Nehru, Vol 2, New Delhi.

political campaign through which the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) is trying to appropriate Mahatma Gandhi and his legacy. Though there were many claims about the successful implementations of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, strikingly the campaign has missed out some important goals that are necessary to achieve its stated objectives and meet its final goal of a 'clean India'. It is in this context that, the present paper tries to engage with the problem of manual scavenging which is not only linked with the cleanliness, but also with social practices of discrimination. Moreover, the paper argues that elimination of the practice of manual scavenging remains the biggest challenge for the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan. Without addressing and eliminating the practice of manual scavenging the objective of clean India remains insurmountable.

2. The context of the problem

The task of manual scavenging involves the removal of untreated human excreta, carrying and moving it to a disposal location from residential places. This task is often completed by using brooms, tin plates and baskets. The communities which engage their 'labour' in order to perform the task of manual scavenging that gives them social sanctioning cannot be seen in isolation from the hierarchies of castes and discrimination. In fact various studies (Ramaiah, 2015, Ravichandran, 2011, Prasad, 2007, & Marcel, 2003) have shown that the occupation that is imposed according to the social status of the people manifests discrimination on the basis of caste. Therefore, a brief reference to the caste hierarchies is necessary to understand the structural relationship between caste system and the practice of manual scavenging.

According to Kumar (2010, p.363) "caste has been for long understood in terms of purity and pollution. The Dalits are called impure on the basis of their defiling occupation. But Dalits argue that it's them who keep the whole society clean then how do they become impure? Second, it is ironical that it is the caste of people who defecate and are unable to help clean their own excreta, remove their dead animals, are unable to help their women to deliver their babies, cannot clean their clothes soiled by blood of menstruation, cannot dig graves for their dead who are deemed clean and pure". These communities, known for their social task of performing the polluted works are identified by different names in different parts of the country.

Vijay Prashad (2000) opines that the bulk of the Balmiki community today labours as sweepers hired by the municipalities of Delhi where they work under the close supervision of Hindu overseers and Jamadars. The Britishers hired a set of castes into the sanitation department due to the dominant belief that ‘caste’ especially for the Dalits, had something to do with occupation. ‘Special circumstances have combined to preserve in greater integrity and to perpetuate under a more advanced state society than elsewhere the hereditary nature of occupation’, a colonial official noted, ‘and this in a higher degree than in other modern nations to render identical the true principal of community of blood and community occupation’. The site of caste of particular importance for the Balmikis is the ascribed link between occupation and caste, one that traps them into work as sweepers.

Moreover, the issue of the labour regime and of a caste’s relationship to occupation has a long history where the social matrix of the relationship was fundamentally reconfigured during the penetration of the countryside by the colonial state and the concurrent expansion of urban areas. It is in this context that, certain castes find themselves locked into specific occupations by the state, a procedure justified by the colonial officials as a mark of caste culture when, in fact, there was little connection between the modern occupation and the caste’s own work history. For the Balmikis, for instance, most worked as general landless field-hands, by the 1880’s those who moved into the cities entered the sanitation workforce and all Balmikis began to bear the taint of being sweepers in perpetuum (Prashad, 2000, p.16).

The practice of manual scavenging, officially banned since decades in India, continues with impunity in several states. The latest socio-economic caste census data released on July 3, 2015 reveals that 1, 80, 657 households are engaged in this degrading work for a livelihood. Maharashtra, with 63, 713, tops the list with the largest number of manual scavenger households, followed by Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Tripura and Karnataka, as per Census data. Following numbers of manual scavenging households were recorded in the data- Maharashtra – 63,713, Uttar Pradesh- 17,619, Karnataka- 15,375, Madhya Pradesh – 23,093, Daman & Diu – 6, 277, Bihar – 5, 296 and Tripura 17, 332.²

² (<http://www.thehindu.com/news/national/manual-scavenging-still-a-reality-socioeconomic-caste-census/article7400578.ece>)

3. Manual scavenging and the manifestation of inequality

There is no single definition of the practice of manual scavenging. However, one may understand the phenomenon of manual scavenging by delineating the characteristics associated with it. As explained by Ramaiah “the manual scavengers those who manually clean and carry other human beings’ excreta defecated in open fields and in private and public dry latrines in urban and rural areas. They are those who dive into drainage manholes, clean the gutters and remove blockages, if any. They are those who sweep and clean streets and dispose dead animals/ carcasses belonging to individuals and groups and also unclaimed ones. They are also those who are called to lift and dispose human dead bodies, including those lying in decomposed condition with unbearable sight and stink and in unapproachable locations” (Ramaiah, 2015, p.70).

Manual scavenging is a caste- based occupation in India since centuries. It is considered to be a hazardous and humiliating occupation that is performed by the lower strata of the Dalits for their survival in different parts of the country. There were constant efforts by the leaders like Mahatma Gandhi to eradicate this humiliating occupation. Gandhi was the first national leader who raised the issue and linked it with independence. He focused on the inhumanity of the practice in 1901 at the Calcutta Congress. When he started the Sabarmati *ashram* in 1918, there was a strict stipulation that no professional scavenger was to be employed. Instead the *ashram* inmates had to clean the toilets themselves. He himself took up the job of cleaning toilets (Thekaekara, 2003). However, after gaining independence and constitutional safeguards, the caste based occupation still remains a source of livelihood for the so called lower castes in the country today. This affiliation with the practice of manual scavenging not only stigmatizes their existence in the society, but also blocks their chances to move into other occupations by affecting their economic development. Therefore, when it comes to the profession of manual scavenging it is not a matter of choice for the people who perform it for their livelihood, but a matter of forced labour.

Manual scavenging, as a caste based occupation, exists in various forms in Indian society which is performed by some so called lower caste communities. Though the practice was banned by the state through various Acts (1993- The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act and The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013) it has not vanished from the society which remains one of the most discriminatory practices today. Moreover, the task stigmatizes

the 'people and their labour' due to which it has been practiced over generations. Manual scavengers are known and identified by different names and nomenclatures in India. They are known as Bhangis in Maharashtra and Gujrat, Phakis in Andhra Pradesh and Sikkaliars in Tamil Nadu. The repercussion of this occupation is to be seen on the health conditions of the people who perform it. Often the scavengers suffer from eye infections and skin type diseases. However, they have to live with those infections and poor health conditions since their livelihood entirely depends on the task of manual scavenging. The reformatory schemes and laws of the state have proved ineffective since it has given the victims of manual scavenging a different nomenclature where they perform the similar kind of task while working with municipal corporations in urban areas. Nothing significantly changes in the lives of the scavengers apart from the fact that they become 'scavengers for the state' with inadequate health facilities in hazardous work conditions.

A study conducted by Beck and Darokar (2005) in Maharashtra suggests that the effect of scavenging work adversely affects the physical and mental health status of those engaged in scavenging. The study shows that, "of the 2, 753 interviewed, about 24% (657) were found to be suffering from diseases of one type or the other. The common diseases that they reported to have suffered include skin disorder, communicable diseases, respiratory disorders, parasitic disorders, diminishing vision, diminishing hearing, both diminishing vision and hearing, and any other, while most of them reported to be suffering from skin disorders, respiratory diseases, communicable disorders, and diminishing visions" (Ramaiah, 2015,p. 73).

This hazardous occupation of manual scavenging is not performed by every lower caste. There are certain castes as mentioned above like Bhangis, Phakis, and Sikkaliars who exclusively perform the task as a social obligation and to meet their livelihood. However, other lower castes too have to perform the task of cleaning or scavenging which exists in different work forms which demarcates them from other communities that leads to their exclusion from the society. This exclusion manifests in different social tasks performed by the lowers caste communities in rural and urban areas.

Kumar (2014, p.22) in his sociological typology of exclusion describes hazardous / stigmatized occupation as a form of exclusion that includes:

- 1) Cleaning of human excreta, 2) Scavenging / cleaning manholes, 3) Midwifery role by Dalit women, 4) Removing carcasses, 5) Grave digging/ burning the dead/ drum beating at the time

of death, 6) Piggery / butchery/ toddy tapping , 7) Cleaning of soiled clothes, and 8) Denial of taking out marriage and funeral processions.

This exclusion which leads to further stigmatization of dalits is sanctioned by the caste order and it is practiced in many villages by different oppressed castes and communities to earn their livelihood and perform their social duties by the so called upper castes. The exclusion of the scavenging communities is linked with their caste and occupation that gives them lower and subordinate status compared to other citizens. Therefore, the caste based occupation of manual scavenging with its fixed employees remains instrumental in creating and maintaining the notion of purity and caste relations.

The scavenger communities are marginalised in social, political and economic spheres of their lives. This marginalization further leads to a different treatment from other people due to which they miss the opportunity to socialize with the other civilians. Guru (2000) describes that the Dalits and other poor classes have a different, marginalised notion of time. According to him “it is the social factor of purity-pollution that makes the upper caste regulate certain timings for the Dalits. The non-Dalit upper castes do not walk into the streets during a particular time, usually morning, in the areas where manual scavenging is still in practice. In social terms, the upper castes still have the option to withdraw from the time slot considered to create the chances of pollution”. Moreover, he maintains that “Dalits cannot aspire for securing respectable jobs. The Dalits are overwhelmingly found in sanitary section of Indian society. They are scavengers, sweepers, rag pickers, coolies; they do other kinds of job which are not only considered to be unimportant, but a sense of wretchedness and filth based on the notion of purity-pollution is attached to them” (Guru, 2000, p.113).

4. Caste, livelihood and the state intervention

As mentioned before, the so-called lower castes in Indian social systems are forced to perform the occupation of manual scavenging due to their structural location in society vis-a-vis their castes. The interrogation of the relation between their occupation and social status enables us to engage with the notion of caste. Similarly, Jodhka also argues that (2015, p.4) “caste exhibits stark material disparities, physically segregated settlements like ghetto communities, institutionalised violence, including untouchability. Hierarchy and purity/pollution are undeniably some of the core ideas around which caste is organized. But they also produce human effects, social inequalities, economic disparities, deprivation, and violence”.

Ambedkar (1944:48) describes caste system as division of labourers where occupation and duties are assigned on the basis of caste. He further maintains that as a form of division of labour the caste system suffers from another serious defect. The division of labour brought about by the caste system is not a division based on choice and is hence, pathological. Individual sentiments, individual preference has no place in it. It is based on the dogma of predestination. According to him there are many occupations in India which on account of the fact that they are regarded as degraded by the Hindus provoke those who are engaged in occupations which arises solely because of the blighting effect which they produce upon them by the Hindu religion. What efficiency can there be in a system under which neither men's heart nor their minds are in their work? As an economic organization caste is therefore a harmful institution, inasmuch as, it involves the subordination of man's natural powers and inclinations to the exigencies of social rules.

The system of castes which mainly depended on the concept of pollution and untouchability divided people in various spheres by organizing them into the camps of 'touchable' and 'untouchable' communities. This division was further legitimised by the occupations performed by specific castes. For example, "the unique position of untouchables was not simply in living outside the village and performing the most 'polluted' occupations; it was also that their position within the caste division of labour made them the most exploited (Omvedt, 1994, p. 49)". In India, there is one large 'marginalized' chunk of community from the Dalits in every rural and urban area that performs the task of manual scavenging. These scavenging communities not only face discrimination from the upper caste Hindus, but also from the sub-caste dalit population.

Though the Constitution of India introduced the Articles that ban untouchability and discrimination against the ex-untouchable communities, exclusion and discrimination against them manifest in various forms such as their engagement with manual scavenging. Intervention to deal with the problem of manual scavenging and exclusion of dalits should come from two levels from the state and the political leadership that claims to represent the oppressed groups and communities. Despite implementing acts such as 'The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993', 'The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013', the practice of manual scavenging still exists. Moreover, the dalit movement and its leaders who follow Ambedkar and his perception of state intervention for the emancipation of the oppressed classes have not been able to achieve much through their political participation.

The dalit leadership in various regions has not taken any concrete step to intervene in the problem of manual scavenging. The dalit representatives in other political parties too have not shown any political will to work on the problem. Thus, the dalit movement with its goal of achieving social, economic and political equality should also embed the goal of eradication of manual scavenging in their struggle which has been neglected from its ambit. There should be a conscious and organised effort to address the problem of discrimination and exploitation of the manual scavengers who are labouring for their survival due to their social location.

According to Teltumbde, Articles 14, 17, 21 and 23 of the Indian Constitution could be counted upon to stop the practice of manual scavenging. For instance, Section 7A and 15A of the Protection of Civil Rights Act 1955 (formerly known as the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955), enacted to implement Article 17, provided for the liberation of scavengers as well as stipulating punishment for those continuing to engage scavengers. Parliament has also passed another Act, the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. But nothing has moved on the ground. While the state governments had gone on denial spree after promulgation of the 1993 Act, the 2011 Census of India found 749, 000 cases of manual scavenging across India. The biggest violator of this law is the government's own departments. Toilets of train carriage of the Indian Railways, for example, drop excreta on tracks, which is manually cleaned by scavengers (Teltumbde, 2016, p.11).

Ravichandran (2011) opines that, this profession is prevalent across India and is exclusively done by the dalit community. And as we know, since every caste has a 'hereditary' profession according to the Hindu Shastras, scavenging definitely qualifies as a caste profession. In north India, scavengers are addressed largely as Bhangis and in the southern states as Arunthathiyars, Rellis, Madigas, Mehtars, Pakis, etc, depending upon the region in which they reside. However, we should not forget that although scavenging is done, with regional variations, by one particular community or caste, the majority of the people within those particular communities are not scavengers. Among the scavenging castes there are large numbers are daily-wage labourers and those who get monthly salaries by working in factories. However, whatever work they have to bear the stigma of profession associated with the caste and the consequent backwardness (Ravichandran, 2011, p.23).

According to Singh and Ziyauddin (2009, p.522) manual scavengers in India, who are caste-based occupational groups, constitute one socially excluded class. The evil of manual scavenging is directly related to the lack of availability of sanitation facilities like food,

clothing and shelter, proper sanitation is one of the basic requirements of mankind. Poor sanitary conditions lead to water-borne diseases like diarrhoea, dysentery, etc., while the lack of sanitation facilities affects all individuals, children and women are particularly vulnerable. As per the World Health Report, 1999, only 49% of the urban population (in 1997), and merely 14% of the rural population (in 2000) have adequate facility for excreta disposal. The problem is more conspicuous in developing countries like India, where practices like the use of dry latrines, manual removal of human excreta and; defecating in the open place exist.

5. The field view

During my field work in Kolhapur and Pune municipal corporations in Maharashtra I interacted with a few individuals from Valmiki community who were rehabilitated under the state rehabilitation programme and had abandoned the practice of manual scavenging in their villages. These people had migrated from their villages after giving up the occupation of manual scavenging. However, the process of rehabilitation also could not provide them a new job for their livelihood. They continued to remain in the practice of scavenging in urban areas under employment of the municipal corporations. Most importantly the occupation of manual scavenging was congenital in their family since their forefathers too were dependent on the manual scavenging for their survival. The present employment was the result of their rehabilitation programme by some Non-Government Organizations (NGO) and opportunities at municipal corporations where they could fit themselves for the job requirements. Nevertheless, their baneful association with the manual scavenging proved to be a menace in the new employment. Though the corporations provided them a constant and dignified source of income, the stigma of being a scavenger and fourth class employee haunts them in the administrative set up of the corporations where they get humiliating treatment from their superiors.

Apart from relying on the state aids, NGO interventions and rehabilitation programmes the people who were engaged in manual scavenging have also been trying to move out of their villages to urban areas to avoid the discrimination practiced in their villages. However, after migrating to cities it becomes highly difficult for them to find employment opportunities since they don't possess certain skills to be employed in the job market. Moreover, the strong caste network that works in the urban areas makes it impossible for them to avail employment opportunities because of lack of networks. On a similar note, Jodhka (2013, p.219) points out, "the experience of mobility of those located at the lower end of the

traditional caste hierarchy, viz., their moving out of village is also not an easy process. Those who move out of the rural/ agrarian economy, into urban entrepreneurship, find it very hard to make headway beyond the margins of the emerging urban economy. In the urban market, caste matters in many different ways for the Dalits trying to establish themselves. In Indian context, caste and kinship communities actively try to preserve their ‘monopolies’. Even when it becomes virtually impossible to do so, kinship networks play a very critical role in urban business economy”. Therefore, for manual scavengers migrating to urban areas, the aspiration to adopt a different occupation in urban areas becomes impossible since it is not easy for them to find a new one.

In Pune city there are scavengers from Valmiki community (known as Bhangi) working in both formal and informal setups. The scavengers working under the municipality office were assigned the duties of cleaning public places like bus stops and toilets. The individuals who were permanently working with the Pune Municipal Corporation had enough reasons for being alienated and having hatreds for their job when they complained about discrimination by their colleagues and lack of safety tools while working in the city. Moreover, the relatives of these employees are gradually adopting this occupation since they lack enough education and working with municipality on a temporary basis doesn’t need any high educational qualification. Even though the job remains to be a low paid job, the survival issue compels them to engage with the occupation. Thus, given this scenario, where the practice of manual scavenging by the scavenging communities continues to be a socio-economic problem, the argument remains that if the campaigns like Swachh Bharat Abhiyan can effectively change the attitude of the society towards the issue of cleanliness and sanitation without addressing the possibilities of eradication of manual scavenging.

6. Conclusion

This paper was an attempt to highlight how the state-led Swachh Bharat Abhiyan has overlooked the problem of manual scavenging predominantly performed by the lower caste groups in Indian society as their caste based occupation. The desperate attempt to promote cleanliness by the Indian state through the campaign has categorically chosen to remain silent on the problem of manual scavenging. The problem it seems is hardly taken into consideration while addressing the issues of dirt-free India. The campaign should have reflected on the inhuman practice of manual scavenging by denouncing it as a caste based occupation. Perhaps, the campaign was the right platform to promote awareness about the

eradication of manual scavenging and rooting out the practice from both urban and rural areas. Therefore, the larger goal for the success of the Swacch Bharat Abhiyan should be the abolition manual scavenging, dry latrines and open defecation in rural as well as urban areas.

Though the government is promoting the concept of Swachhta (cleanliness) for the general awareness of its Clean India Mission, the real challenge lies in the eradication of manual scavenging which has subjugated and tortured the scavenging communities. It's ironical to observe that even after the independence the Dalits continue to have a 'service relationship' with their fellow citizens. It is not surprising that despite the efforts to eradicate the practice of manual scavenging the practice remains prominent among the Dalits today. It is impossible to imagine and achieve a clean India without the eradication of manual scavenging which will also lead to annihilation of caste, and equal opportunities in employment. It is indeed inspiring to see that the state is trying to put in new set of mechanism and practices to promote cleanliness in the form of Swacch Bharat Abhiyan. However, the emancipation of the scavenging communities, who solely depends on the occupation of manual scavenging, remains the biggest challenge for the Swacch Bharat Abhiyan today.

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