

## **On the Margins: A Tale of the Pandemic and the Funeral Workers in Benares**

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**Abstract:** *Caste is one of the core markers of Hindu society. Many castes still continue with their hereditary traditional occupations across India; burning of the funeral pyre is such an unrecognized occupation performed by the Doms. Outbreak of any infectious disease often adds to the burden of a work, which is already challenging. The pandemic COVID-19 unfolded a series of events in the lives of funeral workers in Benares, as they had to negotiate the transition from normal to pathological conditions while carrying on with their occupation. The stigma attached to their work of dealing with death and their caste identity played a pivotal part in undermining their efforts both by the State and the caste-based society at large.*

**Keywords:** Dom, funeral workers, COVID-19, death rites, social stigma.

### ***Introduction***

COVID-19 has created an unprecedented crisis in the world. As the years passed after the declaration of the pandemic in 2020, everyday life moved gradually towards normalization and 'new normal' became part of our daily routine. Some aspects in our day to day lives have changed, be it regular use of face masks, adapting to online mode of education, or change in the collective psyche of people to remain docile and live in the continuous fear of death. The pandemic has been a catastrophic reality forcing the world to crumble with continuously emerging new strains be it Delta or Omicron, hence creating a feeling of bewilderment and existential uncertainty among the masses. The second wave of COVID-19 in India had created turmoil and surpassed the damages caused by the first wave in the year 2020. India had

witnessed a sudden surge in reported cases along with the death rate in 2021. The devastation came in such a way that only corpses were seen wrapped in white shrouds, waiting in queues for cremation along with burning flames of pyres and black smokes filling the sky in the congested spaces. The sudden surge in death rates and disturbing images of piles of dead bodies in hospitals and cremation *ghats* during the second wave questions the role of the State in effectively managing the pandemic and providing proper last rites to the dead bodies.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, the State has failed to acknowledge the role of funeral workers as frontline workers in dealing with the pandemic. Members of Dom had worked round the clock and provided cremation on such a large scale. India had witnessed many epidemics and endemics resulting in a higher mortality rate, but the role of funeral workers mostly remains unacknowledged to date in the existing literature.

This paper examines the role of Dom funeral workers during public health emergencies, and especially the mechanism through which the notion of pollution related to one's caste along with pollution emanating from death led to their marginalization. To study this, ethnographic fieldwork was conducted at the cremation *ghats* in Benares between 2019 to 2021. I had a chance to witness the devastation caused by COVID-19 at cremation *ghats*. I used field data, media reports, and available secondary literature to support my arguments on the nature of marginalization experienced by the Dom funeral workers in this paper.

### ***Funeral work: Stigmatized occupation***

Douglas (1966) and Jordan (2019) argue that the physically handling of dead bodies is often associated with the notions of dirt and contamination (Turner and Caswell 2020: 5). The funeral work is often termed 'dirty work' as it evokes a sense of rejection and disgust (Ashforth & Kreiner 2013: 145). Ashforth and Kreiner (1999) argue the depiction of any work as dirty is a social construct based on 'necessarily subjective standards of cleanliness and purity' (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999: 415). This dirty work is necessary for removing filth so that it helps the society in its proper functioning of community life (Douglas 1966). Literature has elaborated on 'dirty work' that has four forms: social, physical, moral and emotional (Ashforth and Kreiner 1999; McMurray and

Ward 2014). Funeral workers come into contact with all forms of dirt and hence have to deal with the stigma associated with it (Thompson 1991: 415). The work demands proximity to dead bodies, hence resulting in getting physically dirty by the body fluid and physical waste that can come out from the body. Bailey (2010) argues that it is socially dirty work due to the need to serve others and morally dirty as a dead body becomes a source of commercial gain. (Bailey 2010: 150).

From sociological and historical points of view, death has been a subject of avoidance and those groups earning their livelihood through this work are often the victims of stigmatization. Typically, these menial jobs to deal with the dead bodies are assigned to outcastes or untouchables in India, and to the Eta community in Japan. Even in some cases, these groups are prohibited to touch other living beings (Thompson 1991: 404). Stephenson (1985) noted, 'In a society which seeks to deny the reality of death, the funeral director is a living symbol of this dreaded subject' (Stephenson 1985: 223). In American society, these groups who were engaged in handling the corpses entered the 'Forbidden Zone' (Lesy 1987). These groups are at the intersection of opposites, contaminated by the decaying bodies and suffering, and are transformed by the plight of self and destiny of the soul. These groups are not considered 'pure' by the world (Lesy 1987: 5). Fulton (1961) too reiterated in the same voice and wrote, 'In a word, the funeral director, by virtue of his close association with death, in a religious sense, performing 'unclean' work' (Fulton 1961: 322). Thompson's (1991) work on the funeral industry portrayed two major aspects of the general public view on stigmatization, profiting from death and handling the dead bodies (Thompson 1991: 411). Funeral workers often have to work in an atmosphere of stress and tension, and funeral directors are often accused of profiteering from the misfortune of others and hence it leads to stigmatization. In India, polluting work puts them at the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

### *Outbreaks of infectious disease in India*

Outbreaks of infectious diseases during the colonial period have been studied here to understand the role of funeral workers in public health emergencies. Historical evidence mentioned about

huge mortality rate during the past endemics and epidemics causing mass destruction as in the case of plague, malaria, cholera and famine. Malaria was fearsome as it alone accounted for one death among every five lives besides plagues and cholera in 1896. During 1918-19, great influenza had perished around twelve to thirteen million lives (Klein 1973: 642). In Klein's words, "Figures of high and rising mortality from malaria, plague, influenza and dysentery reveal a more gruesome story, death rates for poor in India were far in excess" (Klein 1973: 643).

Mahammadh (2020) has observed that the recent pandemic resembles many characteristics of the plague during the colonial era, especially with regard to the symptoms of the disease and the steps taken by the State to tackle it. He has pointed out that both the diseases were highly contagious and infectious in nature, both spread through mass travel and severely impact the immune system by weakening the immune response of the body. Both had caused huge destruction and led to higher morbidity and mortality rates, and emerged as major public health challenges requiring immediate rapid actions. Moreover, the preventative measures circulated by the health authorities in both cases were similar like observing social distancing along with isolation, hand washing, and the use of face masks (Mahammadh 2020: 325). Generally, the plague can appear in three forms: bubonic, pneumonic and septicemic. COVID-19 is similar to the pneumonic plague as its target points are lymph nodes and lungs. The reported symptoms for both were body pain, headache, chest pain, high fever accompanied by cough and difficulty in breathing. Both Coronavirus and Pneumonic plague infections were transmitted via small droplets produced through sneezing and coughing (Mahammadh 2020: 326). Despite these similarities between both diseases, it seems that the State had failed to tackle COVID-19.

Nathan (1898) stressed the severity of the plague and argues that generally, patients die after the second day of the attack from the disease (Nathan 1898: 190). The official records shed light on the gravity of the 1894 plague disease, around one lakh deaths were reported due to the plague and in 1896, around 1.3 million lives were perished (Klein 1998: 737). Another work showed that around 10 million people had died due to the plague over the period 1892 to 1940 (Polu 2012). The Bombay Plague had led to a crisis for cremation as a sudden rise in the death rate had led to

an increase in huge demand for cremation (Arnold 2021: 70). Cremation grounds were inundated with dead bodies waiting for burning the bodies as the plague had overwhelmed the capacity of cremation sites, the system was collapsing due to a higher number of dead bodies, unavailability of space to burn, and little available fuel for cremation (Arnold 2021: 71). Describing the situation Arnold wrote:

At 11 o'clock on a January morning in 1897, there were nineteen corpses undergoing cremation at Sonapur; six more were waiting. By 12.30 another eleven had arrived. One cadaver was barely reduced to ashes before another was put in its place. Residents fear that the Black Death might once again threaten India in a big way, and events were reflected in the iconography of the period. Dramatic accounts appeared in the Western press showing the incessant flow of corpses being carried to the burning *ghat* or lurid night scenes of Doms stoking the blazing pyres. Photographs circulated in India and abroad of near-naked corpses awaiting burning, attended by weary Doms, and around them scattered all the debris. Some perhaps were intended to convey relatively objective information about how Hindus disposed of their dead; others were riddled with deep revulsion and primitive dread (Arnold 2021: 70-71).

However, neither Nathan nor Arnold writes much about the performance of the last rites. We do not get to know how last rites were performed, and how the state dealt with the problem. In the current scenario of the years 2020 and 2021, it was noted in the media all over India that only corpses were seen as far as eyes would go, be it on the road, in the street, huge queues of dead bodies awaited the last rites. Fire and smoke from the pyres blazed the sky and unstoppable cycles of cremation of dead bodies took place. Funeral workers industriously dealt with the crisis but they remained unnoticed now as well as they were left in the past.

Though there are enough literature and official records documenting the gruesome reality of higher mortality rates and mechanisms adopted by the State officials to deal with the past outbreaks of diseases and current Coronavirus, there is a dearth of literature and reports on the involvement of funeral workers in

performing last rites for the people who had succumbed to death. The work of burning dead bodies is considered the most polluting in most parts of India for ages. The notion of impurity and danger associated with death facilitates the process of stigmatization and discrimination of funeral workers. Chattopadhyay (2020) argues that though the colonial archives provide snippets about the number of funeral workers in respective department payrolls, it fails to acknowledge the city's public health dependency on these workers. During the plague, in some of the health reports, there were some deaths recorded among the funeral workers, yet their role remained largely unacknowledged. The Bombay Plague Committee Report (1898) provides a rare snippet on the efficient work of burial and cremation in controlling the disease (Chattopadhyay 2020).

These instances from the colonial era show how the state had ignored the outcaste Dom in the past during the outbreak of diseases. The next sections of the paper trace how their efforts remain unacknowledged to date and the way their caste identity played a pivotal role in undermining their efforts both by the State and society.

### ***Doms: The funeral workers in India***

The caste system is understood as an 'epitome' of traditional Indian society, where generations are engaged in their hereditary occupations (Jodhka 2017:6). Due to these norms, many caste groups are engaged in their traditional occupations to earn a livelihood at the cremation *ghat* in Benares such as Dom burn the pyre and provide the 'sacred fire' to the deceased (Kaushik 1976).<sup>2</sup> It was also noted that the boatmen (*Mallha*) ferry dead bodies to immerse in the Ganges (Doron 2012). The barber (*Nau*) and funeral priest (*Mahapatras*) also earn a livelihood by engaging in their respective caste-based occupations at the cremation *ghat* (Parry 1994). Dumont (1980) conceptualized caste as a hierarchical system that has been legitimized by the principle of the Hindu religion and principles of purity and pollution. He gave primacy to the distinction of pure and impure. Dumont's description combined the idea of interdependence within the caste with that of repulsion towards each other. He argues,

This opposition underlies hierarchy, which is the superiority of the pure to the impure, underlies separations because the pure and the impure must be kept separate, and underlies the division of labour because pure and impure occupations must be likewise be separated. (Dumont 1980:43).

The Doms are categorized as outcastes or untouchables as they fall outside the caste hierarchy of the four varnas, and are engaged in impure and defiling work with dead bodies. As the work with dead bodies itself is stigmatized, the caste group engaged in it are further excluded because of handling the dead ones and making a livelihood through the grief of others. In the census of 1881, the Doms were classified as a tribe and Clarke mentioned that no effort was made to distinguish the different sub-groups of the original tribe (Clarke 1903: 10). In the Census 1901, they were classified as Hindu outcastes. The natives called them 'Chandals' in the Gorakhpur District, (Clarke 1903: 11). Doms in Benares have a constitutional status of scheduled caste having a population of 14,443 as per the 1971 census. They trace their origin to the mythological Raja Harishchandra who sold himself at the cremation *ghat* in *Kashi*.<sup>3</sup> (Trivedi 2005: 460). Doms of Benares is divided into two distinct professional groups. The principal group is known as Dharakar, Bansphor and Basor who are engaged in basketry and scavenging. The second minor group is known as Dom Mirasi, who earned their living through music. In recent years the main source of income among Dom's is burning the pyre (Sharma 2005: 459). Risley (1915) provides a brief account of the Dom in various occupations like cultivators, basket makers, scavengers, executioners, professional burglars and musicians.

In a similar line Sheering (1872) argues that in the Hindu society 'Dom represents uncleanness, where humanity finds extreme degradation' (Sheering1872:400). He further adds that Doms are usually very poor and dressed in rags, but in Benares, there are two to three families of this caste who are in better condition than the rest of the Dom families. They occupy a place of their own in the fabric of Indian society because without their assistance burning of the dead cannot be performed in Benares and perhaps in other cities of India(ibid). Dom figures as 'The Lord of Death' because he provides five logs of wood required for a funeral pyre and as his prerequisite, he takes the clothes of dead bodies in return. Dom

extracts his fee for three things, firstly for the five logs given by them on which pyre is built, for a bunch of straw and thirdly for the light (Sheering 1872:401). Dom plays an important role in cremation specifically in Benares. Benares is often known as 'the city of light' (Eck, DL 1983) or as a city that celebrates death as it is believed that people attain '*moksha*' here (Kaushik 1976; Parry 1994). Benares hold an important position in Hinduism as it was perceived as the epicentre of Hindu cremation practices. Benares was exceptional in having its cremation ground in the centre of the city rather than on its margins. As generally funerary sites are normally located to the south of a settlement, as the south is the direction associated with Yama, the god of death (Arnold 2021:50). Due to the stronghold of Hindu belief in '*moksha*', the Doms enjoy the reputation of 'Dom Raja', having the boon to bestow salvation to the deceased by providing the 'sacred fire'.

### ***Cremation Ghat in the time of COVID-19***

India announced a complete lockdown at the end of March 2020. There was a sense of fear, doubt, and uncertainty leading to the perplexed mind of the masses regarding the spread of COVID-19 and any mechanism of protecting oneself and their loved ones from the deadly virus. I went to the field at the end of 2019 for my data collection. There was fear among Dom workers during the initial phase of COVID-19. The first COVID-19 dead body came to Harishchandra Ghat from Banaras Hindu University (BHU) hospital on April 21, 2020. The fear was astounding as mortuary staff removed the dead body from the mortuary van and placed it on the ground, there was complete silence at the cremation Ghat and within a fraction of seconds, nobody was visible there except them. Police were informed and a search for Dom workers began, as in Benares it is mandatory to take 'sacred fire' from the hand of Dom to attain '*moksha*' and it's only the Doms who burn the dead bodies even in the gas crematorium.

At the last one Dom worker, aged around 30, came forward to provide the fire by covering his face with a piece of cloth after which the body was cremated in the gas crematorium. He recalled his experience in the following way:



Who will touch those bodies? What if we get infected from them? Though the relatives were pressuring us for wood cremation, we are not informed how to deal with these bodies. After police intervention, it was decided to cremate it in the Gas crematorium.<sup>5</sup>

As it is an ascribed obligation for Doms to provide cremation, so slowly they gathered the courage to burn the pyre. Though the staff of the gas crematorium were provided with safety equipment and were well informed about safety precautions by the municipal corporation, the rest of the Dom workers engaged in cremating dead bodies were not considered important by the officials to disseminate such crucial information.

During the initial phase, only COVID-19 dead bodies were cremated in the gas crematorium and the rest bodies were cremated with wood. Despite death due to COVID-19, some families were reluctant enough to disclose the reason for death and they had their reasons for it. They believed that to attain '*moksha*', wood cremation is considered essential and auspicious. It is argued by the mourners that all the five elements of the body get assimilated back into its main sources such as sky, earth, water, air and fire. And the cremation through the wood in an open space provides an opportunity to witness the process. This further helps in breaking the bondage with the dead ones. One of the mourners had accompanied a Covid dead body of his distant relative to the *ghat* for cremation in the middle of April 2021. He recalled the hospital scenario and shared his experience in the following way:

The condition of the relative was not good and we rushed him to the second hospital when the first one was unable to provide a bed. Though he managed to get a bed in the second one, there was a shortage of oxygen supply, so at midnight we were running to find an oxygen cylinder. We had arranged one oxygen cylinder too, but at around 3 am his condition started deteriorating. Due to restlessness and discomfort, he was forcefully trying to remove all the syringes from his hands that were being used to transfer blood and medicines through veins to his body. As a result, bleeding started from his hand. Nurses and doctors had to tie him up to treat him, but despite all efforts, he couldn't

survive. All the elder males from the family gathered and decided to cremate him with wood. Neither the family members took the certificate mentioning the cause of death due to Covid nor did the hospital staff give it to them. The body was not wrapped in PPE kits, rather only a white sheet was used to cover him. After reaching the *ghat*, no one disclosed the cause of his death, and the body was cremated with all the rites and rituals such as giving the last bath to the body by placing it on the bank of the Ganges river for around 15 minutes, then the pyre was arranged by Dom worker, on which he was cremated.<sup>6</sup>

The Dom workers were not well aware of the risk involved in cremating these bodies without taking precautions as prescribed by WHO (World Health Organization) and neither did anyone inform them. Secondly, families of the deceased were also not willing to disclose the exact reason for death. Hence the life of Dom workers had been at risk. At a time when the Hindu mourners had the dilemma of following the Hindu last rites or observing the protocol for disposing of the body, most had preferred the former. A young boy of aged 16 from Dom recalled an incident,

One evening I was lured by the opportunity of making more money. As the family of the deceased was ready to provide a handsome amount of money, the condition was to manually cremate the deceased with wood, who had died of Covid. I did not inform any of my kin and was confident that no one would be able to figure it out, and hence cremated the body with all the prescribed rites and rituals. I was unaware that my photos were captured by municipal corporation staff during the cremation. When another Covid body came for cremation with wood, and my kin refused to cremate Covid dead body with wood, then they had shown my photographs and threatened us either to burn the body or leave the cremation *ghat* forever. Left with no choice, we were forced to cremate Covid bodies.<sup>7</sup>

Slowly the rate of COVID-19 increased and resulted in higher numbers of mortality. The reported number of cases of Covid death from Feb 2020 till Jan 13th 2022 was around 4,85,350 and was daily adding on to new figures in death records.<sup>8</sup> In April 2021,

news of death from every second house was heard in Benares. Every person was telling about the death of someone they knew and again a lockdown was imposed to curb it. Hence arrived the second wave of the pandemic and slowly no space was left for cremating the loved ones. By this time, the token system was introduced at cremation *ghats*, so bodies had to wait in queues for hours across India. The media was engaged in updating people with the latest figures of deaths and new cases. Many family members had to wait for 20 hours to cremate their loved ones (*The Guardian* 2021). The total number of deaths reported in the months of April and May 2021 in Benares from Harishchandra *Ghat* and Samane *Ghat*<sup>9</sup> alone was 1313.<sup>10</sup> The magnitude of Covid deaths was likely to be around 1058. But there has been continuous debate and doubt about the truthfulness of the exact number of Covid deaths as the dead bodies at cremation *ghats* reveal a different picture. The *Business Insider* mentioned that ‘the COVID-19 death toll in India could be up to 2.4 million, that is 6 times higher than the official figures’ (Shoaib 2021). During this phase, India was countering the challenges from all sides, hospitals were running out of essentials, oxygen supplies, and beds in the hospitals. Many health staff were quarantined. In the funeral industries too, there was a shortage of refrigerated coffins, supply of wood, ambulances, non-functioning gas/electrical crematorium and shortage of funeral workers (Sankar 2021).

In despair, families of the deceased started pressuring Doms of Benares to cremate Covid’s dead bodies through the woods. A Dom funeral worker, aged 27, from Harishchandra *Ghat*, said:

People are asking to cremate the body with wood, but we don’t have any safety equipment. And as our houses are near to the cremation grounds, what if the virus will go to our houses through smoke? At least in the gas crematorium, the smoke will go up. Won’t our families get infected? If people want to burn their bodies on wood, then the government should allow us to burn the bodies on the other side of the Ganges, because no one stays there.

He continued after a pause:

If more bodies come, then we will have to burn them on wood, what else can we do? If we don’t burn those bodies,

who will? Willingly or unwillingly we have to do it. We have this cloth to cover our face as a safety measure. Though the staff of the gas crematorium is provided with equipment and safety measures we have not been informed anything about it.<sup>11</sup>

It is important to note that the cosmic layout of Benares is expressed in a series of sacred territorial boundaries (Rana 2009:2). The area on the left side of the bank of the Ganges river is inhabited by the people and fall within the area demarcated as '*Kashi*' that guarantees '*moksha*' to the deceased soul. Whereas on the other side of the bank of the river is known as an abandoned site, which is mostly uninhabited and is believed to fall outside the range of '*Kashi*' so '*Moksha*' cannot be attained there. This is then an exceptional case as during the pathological circumstances the funeral worker is trying to put an end to the distinction. There have been a series of events in which some mechanisms were negotiated with the changing conditions from normal to pathological such as immersing dead bodies in the flowing rivers rather than cremation. As many distressed families were left helpless due to a shortage of woods and other crucial materials needed for the cremation. Due to the imposed lockdown, the price of materials required for cremation had risen along with increased waiting hours to cremate their loved ones. The State had failed in tackling the situation despite having the experience and information about the chaos created by the Covid in other parts of the world. Due to this, families were compelled to immerse dead bodies in the river (*Business Standard*, June 7, 2021). These images of dead bodies floating in rivers resulted in public outrage, and the State's role was questioned. Cremation grounds were blazing by the fire from the pyres, burning incessantly. As the number of funeral workers was less, they had to work round the clock. Dom funeral workers, aged 24, shared his experience in the following way:

Higher numbers of corpses were coming at that time. They had to wait in the queue as they were provided with a token to get cremated by wood. No space was left, only burning pyres were visible. It was too hot, we could not eat anything, so we were just drinking water, consuming tobacco and working tirelessly.<sup>12</sup>

As the workload of hospital staff had increased, similarly the workload of cremation *ghat* too had increased manifold. The shortage of funeral workers along with limited space for cremation or burial had led to an abnormal situation. Even many crematoria and graveyard spaces were expanded to manage the tolls of dead bodies. In Benares, around five new spaces were allocated to burn the dead bodies, and the technical snag in the working of the gas crematorium further exacerbated the situation. Another mourner who had accompanied a dead body provided a terrifying glimpse of the condition of cremation in Benares, and how the city was struggling to deal with a large number of dead bodies waiting for the cremation, said:

I went to Harishchandra Ghat at around 1 pm. At that time around 10-15 bodies were burned with wood on the cremation ground of Harishchandra *Ghat*. And the gas crematorium was cremating around 20 bodies in the last 24 hours. There were queues of dead bodies that were allotted tokens and were waiting for their turn. In one day, more than 80-90 bodies were burned at Harishchandra *Ghat* alone. You might have not seen such a sight. It can hardly be imagined.<sup>13</sup>

The Executive officer of the Municipal Corporation had tried to recall the incident when he went to Harishchandra *Ghat* as part of his duty,

Around 40 corpses were waiting in the queue for their cremation. Huge numbers of corpses were burning. Our gas crematorium had stopped functioning so it was important to get the body cremated by wood. Besides these, there were fire and smoke on the cremation ground. You can see only ashes and black smoke. You can get infected by staying there. I went into depression after watching such a scene that day.<sup>14</sup>

The same person believed that Doms have been burning dead bodies for decades and nothing can happen to them while cremating Covid bodies without any PPE kits. During the interview, he said, "Have you heard of any Dom who died due to Covid? None, they have been doing this all their life, they have natural immunity".<sup>15</sup>

There had been many problems encountered by funeral workers during Covid. They had tried to raise their voices from different platforms but remained unheard. Many issues were encountered by them all over India, such as the indifferent attitude of the government towards this section of the society, and not providing the proper guidelines and PPE safety kits in many places. Even if they were provided with PPE kits, it was not realized that it can be difficult to burn dead bodies wearing suits made of plastic, moreover, plastic gloves were useless as they often get torn during lifting woods required for cremations (Bhalekar 2021). One funeral worker mentioned 'If we get infected by the virus, we will have no one backing us or our families. We are not doctors or policemen and not recognized as frontline warriors' (Raja 2020). Though the vaccination drive was going on in full swing, this section was once again ignored and not considered as frontline workers of India. This was so, even though their services were too crucial in a pandemic situation.

The Finance Minister of India had announced Rs. 50 lakh insurance cover for COVID-19 frontline workers but again the funeral workers remained out of the ambit of this benefit (ETBFSI 2021). Funeral workers had demanded their health insurance and PPE kits but their demands were unheard (Yashee 2021). There was no space even to stand between burning flames of pyres at the cremation grounds still, Dom's were doing their work in the peak summer. Due to the constraint of space, new bodies were thrown over an already burning body on the pyre. One funeral worker spoke about conditions in the following way: 'If people like us do not get vaccinations on a priority basis, who else would? We, the Chandal face stigma from society every time we go out. People refuse to provide us with rooms on rent. Even shopkeepers refused to sell me goods as I could spread the virus' (Ray 2021).

Dom funeral workers across India had to suffer in the silence. The COVID-19 pandemic was neither the first nor the last one. There is an absence regarding the occupation of Dom, and it's difficult to find any information about their role in any literature dealing either with the plague of 1892, malaria of 1896, or cholera epidemics in the late nineteenth century. The caste identity attached to the notion of benefiting from the death and grief of others barely provides an escape route from the stigmatization

and makes them vulnerable to the recipient of the anger of bereaved families (Thompson 1991). There were several incidents of families engaged in fights and abusing funeral workers across India (Chatterjee 2021). Many funeral workers revealed incidents of arguments with bereaved families on the cost of cremation, and for waiting hours. The situation has been so devastating, that no one could be blamed. People were in a state of despair fighting with the feeling of losing their loved ones and hence often left in anger and disappointment (Kumari 2021). Besides, many had even argued about the discrepancies in revealing the actual number of deaths due to Covid across India (Shoaib 2021).

As noted earlier, the role of the funeral workers became more crucial during the pandemic as they had to deal with dead bodies by risking their lives (Kumari 2018: 113). In the funeral industry, management of infectious cases is a major problem as funeral directors have no formal access to the cause of death or to ascertain the presence of infection. Howarth (1993) notes, 'No formal channels exist for them to gain such information. There is no requirement for clients to report the cause of death, and it is highly unlikely that the bereaved, continuing the policy of confidentiality, would inform the directors' (Howarth 1993: 49 cited by Parson 2008: 75). As Young and Healing (1995) illustrated, funeral workers, don't always wear gloves during handling deceased bodies. There is evidence that HIV (Human Immunodeficiency Virus) can be contracted from the dead body even after death (Young and Healing 1995:69). Still, funeral workers are left with no choice. No efforts were made to provide vaccination on a priority basis to the Dom funeral workers in Benares. I was informed by the Municipal Corporation that these people could go to any of the Primary health centres (PHC). But the process of getting oneself vaccinated includes getting oneself registered on the online portal, it was not an easy task to find the available slot due to the high demand for vaccines. Furthermore, the majority of Dom members are uneducated as from quite an early age, they began engaging in their caste-based occupation to earn a livelihood. Because of this, they had to seek help from a known person who could register them and hence a majority of them remained unvaccinated.

### **Conclusion**

One of the objectives of this paper has been to show how a COVID-19 pandemic unfolded a series of events in the lives of the funeral workers in Benares and how they tried to negotiate the transition from normal to pathological conditions in performing the funeral rites for the COVID victims. The work with dead bodies is already a stigmatized one, hence those pursuing this occupation often faced discrimination and social exclusion. Neither the State nor the society at large noticed the plight and risks these workers had to take. There were no records about how many funeral workers perished by contracting the virus, no proper guidance had been provided to them regarding mandatory safety measures, and no social security in the form of insurance was offered to them. The unprecedented conditions led to an extreme form of exclusion and social marginalization of the Doms of Benares. The dominant society had no time to take note of the plight of the "untouchables" who performed a great service, which none else could have offered, at the time of grave crisis. The Doms, however, came forward with great energy and enthusiasm in performed their duties out of the moral obligation to do their social duty and driven by the idea of doing some extra income which bears high value in their otherwise impoverished existence. They were largely ignorant of the risks involved in their work and nobody care to keep count of how many Doms perished and how many families got ruined in the process.

### **Notes**

1. Ghat is the segment of river frontage. A cremation *ghat* is an open area where dead bodies are cremated on a wooden pyre.
2. It is believed that Dom has received a boon from Shiva, that by taking 'sacred fire' from their hand, the deceased can attain '*moksha*', that is freedom from the cycle of birth and rebirth. The Dom must keep this fire burning without any interruption.
3. Kashi is a demarcated area within Benares, where '*moksha*' is attained. Benares is officially known as Varanasi. But local people prefer to call it Banaras or Benares
4. *Moksha* in the Hindu religion is understood as liberation from the cycle of birth and rebirth.



5. Interview; Respondent 1, Date 02.05.2020
6. Interview, Respondent 2, Date 29.04.2021
7. Interview; Respondent 3, Date 14.05. 2020
8. <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/india/>
9. Harishchandra *Ghat* and Manikarnika *Ghat* are the famous cremation *ghats* in Benares owing to the mythologies connected with these places. At Samane *Ghat*, cremation is performed, but it is not well-known. Due to the large scale of deaths, Municipal Corporation had kept the death record for two *ghats*. During the breakout of covid infection on large scale, bodies were cremated at five cremation *ghats* in Benares.
10. Data provided by Municipal Corporation of Benares.
11. Interview; Respondent 4, Date 15.03.2021
12. Interview; Respondent 5, Date 24.06.2021
13. Interview, Respondent 6, Date 15.04. 2021
14. Interview, Respondent 7, Date 21.06.2021
15. Interview, Respondent 7, Date 21.06.2021

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