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An endless fight against manual scavenging

Vrinda Sharma

Dalit women lead unhygienic lives for wages of Rs.15 a month

Caste hierarchy prevents women from doing any other job

The Railways and municipalities are the biggest employers

AMBALA: Each morning a group of Dalit women step outside their homes to “fulfil their social role” of cleaning dry latrines with their brooms and bare hands. They then carry human excrement in pots and baskets on their heads.

Braving the worst possible form of caste oppression, these women lead unhygienic lives - - devoid of dignity and rights -- for wages as low as Rs.15 a month.

“I was not used to doing this work before I was married but my mother-in-law forced me. I don't blame her; it was the only way we could feed our families. We were told that our ancestors did this and this was the only work we could do as Dalits,” says Kusum, who left scavenging ten months ago to work as a sweeper.

Biggest problem

“The biggest problem is that manual scavenging is seen as an occupation or a social role instead of an inhuman atrocity with a shameful social sanction. I don't believe we need to rehabilitate people. Once you make them realise it is an atrocity, they will quit,” says Wilson Bezwada, national convener of Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA).

Mr. Bezwada is leading a campaign that he hopes will liberate millions by this December-end. Much of the struggle involves liberating manual scavengers from the psychological burden of the caste system as they are invariably Dalits and almost always women.

“Every day after dumping the waste I used to go back to the same houses to collect stale food and beg for money. I worked every single day for over 40 years, even during rains which caused the basket's contents to seep out and cover me in filth. When I left the basket, I felt I was reborn,” says Krishna, now a sweeper.

According to SKA, there were over 11,000 manual scavengers in Haryana five years ago.

Today the number is less than two dozen. “But the Administration always claimed the State was free of manual scavengers and dry latrines, even when hundreds were working in the dry toilets of the Railways and the Municipalities,” says Rajkumar of SKA, Haryana.

Caste hierarchy and untouchability prevented women from rising to any other job. “We don't choose to do this. We're born into it because we are at the absolute bottom of society. The job came as a legacy. But I made sure my children never touched those baskets,” says Manju whose eldest son is in college.

Though houses have proper toilets now, they are not connected with the sewer lines. The sewage falls into an open gutter which is manually cleaned when it overflows. “This is worse than the dry toilets because the accumulated and dried sewage has to be swept and collected in baskets for dumping,” says Rajan Devi, a manual scavenger.

Inhuman conditions

Until SKA intervened, the women worked in inhuman conditions and faced discrimination.

To keep us from coming into the house, we were made to use a rickety wooden staircase against an exterior wall. When I was eight months pregnant, I slipped. Instead of having pity, they abused me for polluting their house,” recalls Saroj.

Cleaning dry toilets and manually removing human waste is a violation of human rights and dignity and was prohibited over 17 years ago. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, lays down a jail term of up to one year or fine of Rs.2,000.

However, there were no prosecutions until 2005 when 21 people were convicted in Haryana. “But they got bail the next day. I should add that Haryana claims to be a scavenger-free State” says Mr. Wilson. Workers cleaning open gutters, manholes and septic tanks, which mean greater risks, are not covered by the Act.

A petition by SKA in the Supreme Court in 2003 forced the State Governments to act in 2007. “Though administrations will deny manual scavenging, municipalities and the Railways are the biggest employers. Indian Railways responded to one of our PILs saying they would take over 30-40 years for the transition and promised to ‘consider’ the court order. The tracks have to be cleaned manually since coaches have the ‘open discharge’ system, and most stations are not equipped with concretised platforms allowing waste to be washed away with jets of water.”

Most scavengers have respiratory problems, asthma, tuberculosis and jaundice. To escape the sight and smell, many male scavengers take drugs and alcohol and eventually succumb to diseases. As Mr. Wilson puts it, “They cannot tolerate the smell and sights and drugs or liquor are their form of escape from reality until the next round when they will go on and start cleaning.”

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