

Socio-Cultural Environment of Business

Group Assignment



Valmiki's –

Children Of A Lesser God

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Executive Summary

The Constitution of India, which came into effect on 26th January 1950, declares the Union of India to be a sovereign, socialist, secular, democratic republic, *assuring its citizens of justice, equality, and liberty and, to promote among them all, fraternity*. The chief architect was none other than Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, a Mahar (untouchable Dalit caste) who fought his entire life fighting social discrimination and the system of varnas.

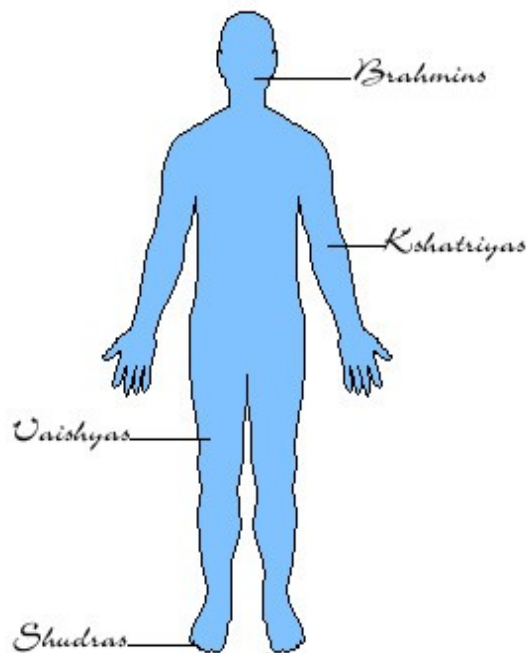
Among Dalits, the Valmiki face an even worse situation. They are restricted to the three occupations: cleaning latrines, sweeping and scavenging. Also known as Bhangis, they continue to work in their traditional roles and they continue to face severe social barriers, discrimination, and hate crimes. The laws ban manual removal of human waste and building of dry toilets but valmiki continue the same work.

Navsarjan, an NGO, is working hard to eradicate manual scavenging and is helping to improve the Valmiki community by providing them information on their rights, legal help, vocational training. Dalit Shakti Kendra is the educational program of Navsarjan which provides vocational training.

During our visit to Dholka, we tried to understand the society of valmiki and try to understand the basic issues faced by them or atleast a perspective which let us wonder why things were at such a sorry state.

Caste system in India

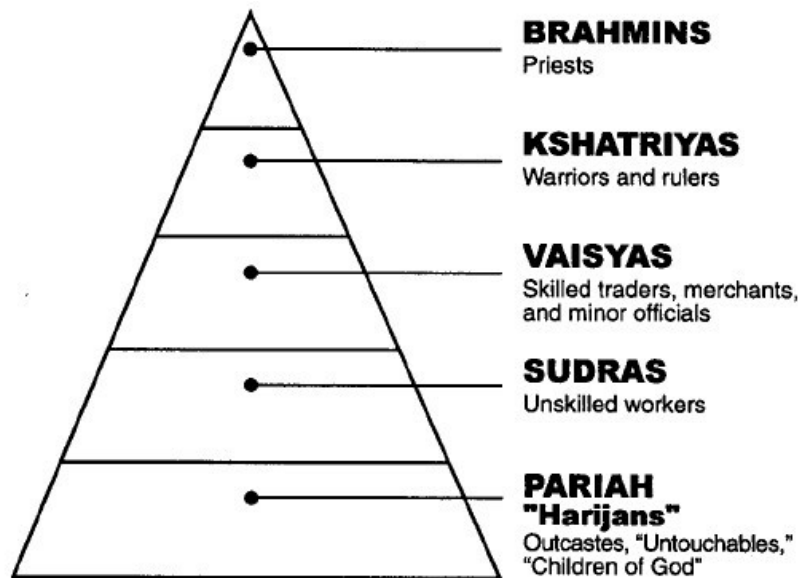
In ancient India, Chaturvarnas or the Caste system in India has categorized and split the society into 4 classes from top to bottom: the Brahmins – the learned scholars and teachers who taught, the Kshatriyas – the warriors who ruled the land and protected their citizens, the Vaishyas – merchants who provided the needed services and the Sudras – the class of citizens who served the other 3. The myth is that each of these were borne forth from different body parts of the Creator Brahma. The Brahmins from the head, the Kshatriyas from the hands, the Vaishyas from the thighs and the Sudras from the feet.



Dalit – Valmiki

Dalits fall under the Shudra category. The word "Dalit" comes from Sanskrit, and means "ground", "suppressed", "crushed", or "broken to pieces". They have been traditionally associated with impure jobs like manual scavenging, removal of human bodies (Chandalas) or animal carcasses and human waste. Among the Dalits, Valmiki are the people whose job is to clean, sweep and clear manual waste. They are the manual scavenging community and they are treated inferior by even the other Dalits. Gandhiji popularized the word Harijan, meaning "child of God" since he felt that all are born equal and it is not fair to label someone untouchable. But it is Gandhi's homestate that we see the same atrocities committed even now.

The constitution of India prohibits discrimination based on caste and has banned untouchability. But it is only enacted in paper and untouchability is in practice even today and communities like Valmiki bear the brunt of it because of the kind of jobs they have to perform.



Human Scavenging often includes the carrying of human faeces by carrying them in buckets on one's head which is banned constitutionally and so is building of dry toilets but there are indeed many dry latrines all over the country and these valmikis or bhangis are forced to perform the manual scavenging.

Human Scavenging – Current State

Human scavenging exists everywhere – right from temples to wealthy individual houses to places of religious requirements. The funding for employing these workers is provided by the government. These workers face the following problems as a part of their occupational hazards:

1. Health issues
2. Psychological issues
3. Social Stigma
4. Occupational dangers

Per the latest study, there are over 64000 Valmikis in Gujarat alone whose main occupation is to clean manual waste. They are untouchables ostracised by the society, but the society expects them to perform the lowest of the jobs. They have to carry the human waste away in buckets on their heads. The social stigma is so bad that even the other dalit untouchables do not want to be associated with the Valmikis and treat them as inferiors.

Currently manual scavenging is present in 18 or more states in India. The pay is next to nothing as the average salary ranges between Rs. 50 and Rs. 600.

Valmikis – why?

The factors can briefly be put under two divisions – External and Internal. External factors are affected by the social, political and economic environment of the society which the valmikis live in while the internal factors are due to the internal friction among the community themselves.

External Factors:

- Untouchability
- Caste issues
- Lack of Education opportunities
- Poverty – economic concerns
- Lack of Employment opportunities

Internal Factors:

- Identity crisis
- Lack of unity in the community
- Lack of goals/ambitions
- Lack of role models
- Shortsightedness
- Myopic Leaders and their selfish interests



A Valmiki community leader trying to address the gathering

As you can see there are few positive factors and all the above are barriers which impede the growth, if any, of the Valmiki community.

Valmiki Adults

Most of the Valmiki adults are illiterate. Most of them have never been allowed to set foot in a school. Most of them have no memory of their childhood spending in any location of learning. They know school as a place where their sons and daughters might want to go one day leaving the menial job they perform.

Most of the Valmikis are in a temporary cleaning master job employed by the municipality. They bear the brunt of discrimination at work where they are not employed anywhere else but only in the cleaning/sweeping jobs.

Most of the men drink and gamble in their free time with whatever meagre money they have while the women take care of the family and provide the daily needs.

Women face even worse situation as many of them are put into manual scavenging work after their marriage. Women are traditionally traded as commodities – they are bought by the 'in-laws' and put to work. Any dreams of them hoping to see their sons and daughters going to school is lost in the cruelty of the situation.

As young girls, they perform the chores of the house – sweeping, cleaning utensils, etc and this continues forever. Their parents take them along when they go to perform cleaning jobs and they have no respite even from their families.



*An Old Valmiki Woman ponders
the proceedings ... is there any
hope for her granddaughters?*

It would be unfair to comment that most of the men have a drinking or gambling problem and leave their women to take care of the family but if your day-to-day job was to clean manual waste or manholes, I wonder how many would start drinking or gambling to take our minds away from the thought of it.

Valmiki Kids



Does this look like a pool ...



Hope ... in their eyes



Hardly any worry of the future ... pure joy!!!

Valmiki Kids

Most young valmiki children try to go to elementary school. The parents send them to school when they are too young to do any work either inside or outside their homes. But the real problem starts when they are at age of around 11 or 12. Most of the boys tend to pick up smoking or tobacco when they are at this age group while most of the girls are forced to go scavenge with their parents as they see it's a family 'heirloom' that every girl must wear. The girls pickup plastic wrappers, odds and ends metals, milk covers, newspapers while their parents are cleaning or sweeping for the municipality.

The boys tend to start smoking early. Cigarettes or Beedi come easy to them while during the rest of the day they play marbles or cards for money. Alcohol is but one step away as they see their dads and uncles partake of alcohol and it is considered normal to drink.

Some of the young girls are forced by their parents to beg for food or money after they come back from the school.

Due to the social stigma they carry, there is little or no socialization with other community kids. Even in schools, the valmiki kids are forced to sit in the last benches and forced to clean the school classrooms, sweep the toilets, etc.

They are sermonized by their own parents if they are found playing with other community kids while it is even worse when they are caught playing with other

community kids by other community parents. There have been instances of physical violence against kids caught playing with 'upper caste' kids.



This kid asked me: Bhayya, aapko cigarette chahiye 😊





A mentally challenged valmiki youth

He is made fun of by everyone and his parents beat him if he doesn't show up to beg for food or money. He is the loved by his friends though.

Discrimination at school

The few valmiki kids who go to school are forced to sit in the last benches and they are treated as 'small scavengers/cleaners'. Some of the girls are forced to clean school toilets, sweep common places. Untouchability is exercised here where the valmiki kids are not allowed to use common material available to other kids be it textbooks or play.

One of the complaints the kids say is that the teachers discriminate blatantly. They make the kids do menial jobs in school and don't let the kids mingle with the other kids. Also, a common complaint is that around eighth or ninth standards the valmiki kids are intentionally failed by the teachers. All this goes against the very principles of equality mentioned in the constitution of our country.



Education .. will it take her somewhere?

Higher Education



2 Higher Educated Valmiki Youth

Generally in a valmiki community there are around 500 households and around 2500-3000 people. Of the 500 households, only 2 out of 500 reach college or any level of higher education.

Even someone who has graduated gets very little government assistance as to finding a reasonable employment. Even though reservation is there for the lower castes, when the valmiki youth reveal their sub-caste, they are set aside by the officials and only offered the cleaning jobs in the municipality or similar locations. So the route where they could get any help is destroyed by the discrimination when their valmiki identity is revealed. We found that a few graduates are cleaning manholes in the city – a very hazardous job with menial pay and no future.

Also, for further higher education, there is no special reservation in educational institutes nor in any private institutes. So you have to wonder what really are the choices available to those few who gain some amount of college education.

Manual Scavenging

Manual scavenging is the manual removal/clearing of human faeces from dry toilets. Even though the building of dry toilets is banned, there are many which exist out there and the valmikis are the ones who clean and do the scavenging work. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 punishes the employment of scavengers or the construction of dry (non-flush) latrines with imprisonment

for up to one year and/or a fine of Rs 2,000. However some municipalities still run public dry-toilets which are funded by governments.



An outside of a dry toilet .. can't imagine how it will be inside.

The central government in many instances has vowed to eradicate manual scavenging but it has only enacted it in paper and the reality remains the same.



Can you imagine someone sweeping and cleaning this place? What kind of society do we live in where we make our fellow brothers and sisters do such things ...

What is hurting Valmikis

The problems faced can be summed up by two factors – the inactions of the government and the self.

The biggest and most important factor faced by Valmikis is the fact that the Government does not ACCEPT that manual scavenging exists. If and only if the government agrees that a problem exists can it even think of eradicating it. So valmikis have a government funded job refuted by the governments themselves.

The second crucial factor is that most of the valmikis want to continue with the same job. This is due to the fact that they are in a mental state where they feel that the scavenging or cleaning job is their birthright and they feel that this is steady job. Who would have believed that even such a menial job could provide one with job security. The other facet is that these valmikis are afraid that these jobs could be lost to other 'dalit' communities if they say no to doing a menial job.

Also, the jobs are only for 2-3 hours a day and you get a feeling that most of these valmikis are not willing to work for any more on a given day. Also the women feel that this job is a fate and it is up to them to make sure the next generations follow the same.

A few valmikis open small shops but they fail as they are discriminated by people who don't buy from them. Most of them do not get any financial aid and the few who received it to open shops waste it on marriages or religious ceremonies or aiding their drinking, gambling habits.

Role of NGO – Navsarjan

The main role of Navsarjan is to educate the valmikis of their rights and help them fight the government and other institutions that by their inaction aid the discrimination. Also, they run life insurance programs for the valmikis.

In the Dalit Shakti Kendra, they provide for vocational training and they also run 3 schools for the kids. Their goal is to provide the valmikis with skills that will help them earn their livelihood without any dependency on the government or anyone.



Dalit Shakti Kendra, Navsarjan



Number of people trained by DSK

Biggest Barriers

Some of the biggest barriers faced by the valmikis can be summed up thus:

- Non-cooperation by the Government
 - Does not admit to the existence of manual scavenging
 - All local bodies of governments violate the law
- Caste based discrimination
- Judicial remedies painfully slow
- Mindset of valmikis
 - Union issues
- Dalit exclusion of valmikis – lack critical mass
- Scavenging – valmiki problem
 - Fear of safety and survival

Our Views

It would be futile to assume that we have understood all the valmiki issues and we can recommend solutions to fix the issues. But here are some rudimentary steps which can be taken which might improve the status of the valmikis.

The biggest improvement or change which can help the Valmikis is if the discrimination is stopped in anyway. Also this is probably the most daunting task faced by one and all. As society is steeped in its rituals and customs, the gravity of the task becomes serious if we can change this at all. Also the untouchability needs to be eliminated.

One thing which sure to change the mindset of the valmikis if there are alternate employment sources available to them. Right now, they are caught between a rock and a hard place and their biggest fear is that their job will be usurped by other dalits. For this the governments and authorities have to come down hard and stop building of dry toilets and close down all such existing ones.

Also there needs to more political help available to these valmikis. Along with that more opportunities should be available to them to increase avenues to learn new skills. For the ones who get sufficient education, government could come up with special reservation for getting decent jobs.

The two or three college educated youth said that they were not facing any discrimination in the job scenario while the vibe seemed to reek of discrimination left us wondering the conflicting nature of the issue itself.

References

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