

THE HINDU

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Enslaved by tradition: the manual scavengers of Vidisha

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THE HINDU FAILED BY MODERNITY: Basanti Bai, a manual scavenger, with her "tools" - a metal scraper and wicker basket. Photo: Mahim Pratap Singh

Over 200 families in this district of Madhya Pradesh continue to bear the brunt of caste discrimination.

Vidisha, a thriving trade centre of ancient India, finds glorious mention variously for Emperor Ashoka's governorship, for featuring in Pali scriptures and Kalidasa's romantic epic *Meghdoot*, as a premier tourist destination in glossy brochures of Madhya Pradesh Tourism and as the parliamentary constituency of Sushma Swaraj, the Leader of the Opposition in the Lok Sabha.

That the banned practice of manual scavenging is still a forced occupation for several Dalit families here is seldom written about.

According to unofficial estimates, over 200 families in the district continue to bear the brunt of caste discrimination primarily through the practice of manual scavenging.

"Every morning, I go to eight to ten households, collect the garbage in a straw basket and dump it a mile away from the village. When it rains, the waste oozes through the basket over to my hair," says Guddi Bai (38) of Nateran *tehsil*.

The waste she is talking about is human excreta, euphemistically called "night soil". Guddi belongs to the Valmiki community, relegated by the caste system to practise manual scavenging as their traditional occupation.

Ironically, Guddi, who goes from house to house collecting human faeces every morning, has a water-seal latrine at her house.

Nateran, the *tehsil* visited by this correspondent, has eight families that practise manual scavenging in its headquarters alone, and in all cases it is the women who do the job while the men work as agricultural or construction labour.

While the practice was banned by law in 1993 with the passage of The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, it still continues in several parts of India. The deadline for the eradication of manual scavenging from the country, after having been revised thrice (December 2007, March 2009 and March 2010), was recently set for 2012-end by the National Advisory Council, headed by UPA chairperson Sonia Gandhi. Following its last meeting on the issue in October, the NAC noted that it was, "deeply distressed to observe that the shameful practice of manual scavenging persists in India, despite being outlawed".

Official denial

An important reason for the failure of the Centre and the State government in eradicating this dehumanising practice seems to be consistent official denial.

In 2006, the Madhya Pradesh government, along with some other State governments, filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court claiming the practice had ceased to exist in the State. However, a counter-affidavit was filed by 17 organisations from all over India along with photographs and video clippings of manual scavenging, proving the official affidavits wrong.

While Vidisha District Collector Yogendra Sharma accepts that the practice still continues, he does not find economic deprivation to be a reason.

“All these families have alternative livelihood options; most of them have BPL and Antyodaya ration cards, cattle etc. The only reason, I understand, they are still doing it is because they have been doing it for generations and because it is easy money for them compared to jobs that require hard work like agriculture,” says Mr. Sharma.

“We are now making efforts to motivate them to abandon this practice willingly,” he adds.

The dilemmas of rehabilitation

During the five-year period of the 10th Plan, Madhya Pradesh received Rs.2.9 crore under the Centrally-sponsored Pre-Matric Scholarship scheme for the children of those engaged in “unclean occupations”.

However, people in the occupation note the scholarship requires getting a 100-day “unclean work certificate” from the authorities, which is almost impossible since issuing the certificate would mean the legally abolished practice is still going on — a fact the authorities do not want to admit.

According to the Ministry of Social Justice figures, out of a total scavenger population of 81,307 in the State, 77,512 have been rehabilitated under the Centrally-funded Self-Employment Scheme for the Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) and only 3,795 remain.

Unofficial sources put this figure at around 8,000 to 10,000.

The SRMS, formulated in 2007, envisaged the rehabilitation of manual scavengers — in a phased manner, by the end of 2009 — by assisting them in finding alternative employment through term loans (up to Rs.5 lakh) and micro financing (up to Rs.25,000).

However, the rehabilitation schemes concentrated only on the financial aspect and ignored the social aspect, causing several “rehabilitated” people to eventually fall back to the practice. The financial rehabilitation programmes were male-centric, while it is the women who make up the largest chunk of those engaged in this occupation.

“Firstly, the programme does not have any specific provisions targeting women and secondly, most of the projects for which loans are provided are not women-friendly,” says Asif Sheikh of Garima Abiyaan, a Dewas-based NGO.

Patron-client relations

Another important reason for the practice continuing even after 63 years of independence and 17 years after a law was passed by Parliament banning it, is that it derives a “traditional legitimacy” from the patron-client system, which is firmly entrenched in the psyche of those who perform this degrading job.

The families in Nateran note that scavenging is not a means of sustenance and they make ends meet by doing other jobs like agricultural labour.

“All I get for working everyday is around 20 to 50 kilos of grain annually and a few old clothes on occasion,” says Basanti Bai (40) who has been scavenging ever since she was handed the job by her sister-in-law after her marriage.

Why doesn't she quit then?

“If we quit, the upper caste women ridicule us. ‘*Tum to panditaain ho gayi ho*’ [You seem to act like a Brahmin woman], they say. Moreover, that is the way it has always been going on,” she says.

“The patron-client system, in a strange way, provides security of employment and, given the nature of this job, it basically is secure as there is no one to compete with and hence it will require determined social, political and economic rehabilitation measures on the part of the government if this dehumanising practice is to end,” says Professor Nandu Ram, director of the Ambedkar Chair at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

The Valmiki, and other scavenging communities, also face discrimination from other Dalit communities such as the Jatavs and the Ahirwars and are relegated to the lowest levels of the caste hierarchy among Dalits.

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