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Wild flowers and morning has BROKEN



For most manual scavengers, the choice of profession is terribly limited due to caste dogma, lack of education and skills, and paucity of jobs

Hardnews Bureau

Slogans like Jai Bhim! and Rookhi Sookhi Khayenge, Maila Nahi Uthaenge, reverberated in the air with hundreds of young and old, men and women, some at the threshold of adolescence, some in the grey years of their lives, clapping, dancing, celebrating their liberation. It's heady, this freedom, because it has taken centuries to overcome the curse, exile and condemnation.

Recently, 250 manual scavengers from 20 states gathered in Delhi after a month-long yatra which traversed through 176 districts of India. They persuaded people to quit the world's most menial, degrading, inhuman, self-defeating, filthy 'profession' forced on them through centuries by the oppressive doctrines of untouchability and the caste system. Despite all the hype surrounding the leaps of the neo-liberal Indian economy, there are more than one million Indian citizens who still carry human excreta on their heads. In many parts of the Hindi heartland in the north or in the southern states, it's hard to miss the sight of young girls and older women walking with cane baskets stinking of night soil, or men cleaning sewers with bare hands. It's shameful. This epic saga of human bondage.

"I have been picking filth since I was born. Previously, at my father's home, and now at my husband's place. People don't allow us to even enter their houses. We are the outcastes in society," says Shakuntala, a middle-aged woman from district Roorkee. She used to get Rs 20 a month from each house for cleaning dry latrines. Now, she sometimes works for a private company on a contractual basis, but the job is still in the house-keeping department, cleaning and sweeping. And yet, it's a relief from the daily degradation of the past.

For most manual scavengers, the choice of profession is terribly limited due to caste dogma, lack of education and skills, and paucity of jobs. Whatever opportunity comes, it often takes them back to what they wanted to leave, the same old routine of picking up filth. And all that changes is their employer.

Bhangis, as they are referred to in common parlance, are treated as untouchables and ostracised by other caste groups, even Dalits. Political parties never take up their cause. Despite Gandhi's call during the freedom movement, the Congress did not move one inch on their issue. Dalit parties like Mayawati's party, BSP, are cold and inhuman. Even communists seem to have allowed these condemned 'proletariat' to rot in their own tragic fate. For the bureaucracy, they do not exist. And the private sector industry has never bothered to create jobs for them. Even NGOs shun them. Though all they are looking for is an alternative, modest profession.

"Our children are victims of mockery by other children in schools. We are not even invited to marriages or social dos," says Dileep Hathibed, from Nagpur. He worked for 10 years as a night soil carrier and later got a government job as a safai karamchhari after his mother's death, who was also in the same profession. "They throw rotis outside for us to eat," says Charanjeet from Ambala who has been a manual scavenger since she was 10. Then, she used to accompany her mother who would go from house to house, cleaning toilets.

The practice was outlawed in 1993. However, the abjectly insensitive attitude of various governments, coupled with the lack of consciousness in our civil society, has ensured that the degrading practice continues. Dry latrines are still being constructed even in prosperous states like Punjab, where Dalits constitute the biggest chunk in the entire country, and where caste oppression is intense and widespread. Even Lucknow, the parliamentary constituency of a former prime minister, had its share of manual scavengers. The ex-PM did nothing for them.

The National Advisory Council in a meeting held in October noted that "the shameful practice of manual scavenging persists in India, despite being outlawed. Women, men and even children from very poor families are entrapped in this humiliating vocation where they gather human excreta, cleaning the dry toilets of many with bare hands, brooms or metal scrapers. It is intolerable that this type of violation of human dignity is still endured. The persistence of dry latrines in various parts of the country is against law and violates Articles 14, 17, 21 and 23 of the Constitution."

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However, for the ones who have quit this dehumanising profession, the tide has turned. They can now see the full moon in a clear sky, and wait for a new, sublime morning, with wild, fragrant flowers blooming in their neighbourhood. "Now I stitch clothes for women and earn enough that all four of my children can study," says Sirjeet Kaur. She worked for six years as a night soil carrier in Shimla. "Even if there is intense pain in my life, I will not return to manual scavenging," says Narayanamma, the first liberated woman from Karnataka.

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Indeed, morning has broken. Because this is what all the Narayanammas in modern India should say for all to hear, as symbols of radical social change, life-affirmation and hope.

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