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Ahmedabad's man-eater manholes

S Krishnan / DNA

Manual scavenging is a fate for lakhs of people of across the country, with the refusal to carry out such work resulting in physical abuse and social boycott. The work involves removing human and animal excreta using brooms and small tin plates that are carried on the head. According to the Navsarjan Trust, Gujarat is fourth among the states of India in terms of the number of manual scavengers, following Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra.

Sumitra Prajapati is one of the many manual scavengers in the city, removing the night soil from 25 houses every day. "For nearly a decade, I have been cleaning human excreta from public places in Vastrapur without any equipment. I am forced to clean the dirt with my bare hands and, in return, I am paid very poorly. I am treated as an untouchable, an outcast," she said.

Manju Parmar, another manual scavenger, is employed by the municipal corporation. Her daily routine involves cleaning dry latrines from 6 am to 11 am. "I collect the faeces and carry it on my head to the river, half a kilometre away. I do this seven to 10 times a day. In the afternoon, I clean gutters. Someone else collects the rubbish from the gutters, which I pick up and carry a distance of one kilometre," she said.

Parmar has been doing this for the last 10 years, since her husband died. "I earn Rs30 a day. Nine years ago, I was paid Rs16 per day; then it increased to Rs22. For the last two years, I have been paid Rs30. But the payment is uncertain," she said.

In 1993, the government enacted the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act. However, many municipal corporations and municipalities still run dry toilets. "Not only do the civic bodies run dry latrines, but the government also does not know for sure how many there are in the country," said Shivkumar Adival, a member of a manhole workers' union.

"The scavengers are mostly from the Dalit community. They crawl into the compartments and empty the receptacles, with filth falling on their bodies. Because of this, most of them suffer from respiratory infections, gastrointestinal disorders and trachoma (a form of contagious bacterial conjunctivitis resulting in blindness)," said Kirit Rathod, a member of the Navsarjan Trust.

"Manual scavenging is a forced caste-based occupation, employing more than 1.3 million people across India. The state government often denies the existence of manual scavengers," said Manjula Pradeep, trustee of the Navsarjan Trust.

Machines yet to replace humans

Despite a rise in number of deaths of manhole workers every year, sewage workers in Gujarat are forced to carry on with their hazardous job without any protective gear. As a result of this, they have to face the threat of unnatural deaths almost every time, every day.

More than 500 sewerage workers have so far died from inhalation of noxious fumes during the last three years. Moreover, even a Gujarat high court directive of February 2006, has asked civic bodies not to employ 'human agency' for sewerage cleaning operations, unless it becomes absolutely necessary. Again, even in case of employing 'human agency', he (the worker) shall be provided with all safety equipments, such as oxygen masks, helmet, goggles, gumboots, air blower, safety belt, torch etc, it stated.

The high court had also noted in its order: "If it is found that there is possibility of any kind of accident or the presence of poisonous gas is noticed, the worker should not be allowed to go inside the manhole. If the higher authority insists upon a worker entering the manhole, such order should be given in writing and in case of any accident, the responsibility would lie on the concerned officers as well as the civic body, and it will expose them to civil liability as well as criminal prosecution.

While 15 manhole deaths have occurred this year alone, civic bodies in the state are yet to procure the equipment or discontinue the practice of engaging contractors for this purpose. Talking to DNA, Tarun M Lad, special city engineer, said, "We do not allow any workers to get into the manholes. We have procured some equipment like sewer cleaning bucketing machine, deep-suction combination machine to replace workers. We are also trying to end the contract system as well as cleaning of manholes manually."

Executive trustee of the Kamdar Swasthya Suraksha Mandal, CP Patel questioned the effectiveness of using machines at a time when the workers are dying from cleaning sewers manually. "If the civic agencies say that they have super-sucker machine costing Rs1,25 crore, why are they not been used on the ground level," he asked, adding that the practice of cleaning gutters through contractors is rampant and contractors are not concerned about the safety of the workers.

"Not only this, they have only two machines for the entire state and neither do they have skilled manpower to operate these machines," Patel lamented.

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