

Manual Scavenging: stigma, discrimination and justice

Safai Karmachari Andolan - New Delhi

August 2012

What does stigma mean to a manual scavenger?

If we look up a dictionary the word 'scavenger' refers to an animal or bird. But in India or in any other caste affected country the word scavenger means Dalit or a human being who is considered as 'untouchable' or 'polluting' by caste persons. So for a manual scavenger, social identity and stigma is being born as a 'low caste' and as a 'scavenger'. Because of being born to a scavenger, the caste society forces her to be a scavenger for life. This is not an occupation or livelihood but really a social identity that is forced upon her. The stigma is further systematised by segregation of social location and segregated habitats of 'scavengers'. This stigma and caste discrimination has actively excluded all persons and communities engaged in manual scavenging from social and economic opportunities of equity.

What does sanitation mean to a manual scavenger?

For the manual scavenger, sanitation means being forced to clean up the faeces of other people. It means cleaning up dry latrines in houses or public spaces, railway tracks, sewage drains or septic tanks. There is no known case of any person who is engaged in this dehumanising occupation because she likes it or thinks of it as a divine service or duty. The 'manual scavenger' hates to handle human faeces and clean up dirty toilets.

What does sanitation mean to the state and civil society?

In India toilets and latrines are the unmentionables. They are meant to be unseen and kept outside at the back of the house. There is a stigma attached to toilets and latrines itself and more to the person cleaning them. Sanitation is not considered as a professional service but as the 'karma' of the Dalits. During elections, water is promised to bring in votes but sanitation is never mentioned. Sanitation means a Dalit person in a municipal uniform wielding a basket and broom or sitting on the garbage in the garbage truck, with whom any contact should be avoided. Persons engaged in manual scavenging have repeatedly narrated of how people, on seeing and identifying them, cross to the other side of the streets to avoid them even when they are not engaged in the work. There is no logic or rationale or justification that the state can provide for this atrocious condition or situation of sanitation in the country. We have seen tremendous growth in every other sector – science, economy, technology, agriculture, nuclear, etc. But in sanitation we have only gone backwards. The only reason for this is the continuing status quo of casteist attitude and behaviour.

How do we resolve this situation?

A woman engaged in manual scavenging said to a European when asked for her message to take back, "make my country like yours!" At the outset, we appreciate and acknowledge the very progressive steps taken by the Government of India over the last 25 years to outlaw and prohibit manual scavenging. India has enacted legislations to address the stigma and discrimination of Dalits and to outlaw manual scavenging, through the prohibition of untouchability act, SC/ST prevention of Atrocities act, Prohibition of bonded labour act and the Prohibition of Manual scavenging and

construction of dry latrines act. The government of India has also formulated many policies and schemes through dedicated departments and commissions to liberate manual scavengers and for their rehabilitation. In the light of all these SKA makes the following recommendations:

- Declare zero tolerance policy to manual scavenging and dry latrines
- Prioritise the conversion of all dry latrines in public spaces, railways, trains and private households through adequate budgetary allocations.
- The action should be taken out on a war footing and no resources spared to liberate manual scavengers and demolish and convert all dry latrines including in railways and trains.
- Sanitation services should be put on par with other public services like fire service, ambulance service, rescue service, police services etc.
- All sanitation services should be professionally trained with the best and sophisticated equipment like in developed nations.
- The UN should give an ultimatum to India to eliminate manual scavenging quickly and demolish and convert all dry latrines and prioritise railways as it is the largest violator.
- The UN should declare manual scavenging as the worst crime against humanity and make any country still employing manual scavenging and maintaining dry latrines accountable and impress upon the GOI to establish with immediate effect a dedicated and separate ministry for the liberation, justice and rehabilitation of the manual scavengers.
- Rehabilitation of manual scavengers to be considered as a right and include decent housing with adequate water and decent sanitation, support for a dignified livelihood, children education support from school to college to professional education and health care.

Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) is a national movement in India committed to the total eradication of manual scavenging and the rehabilitation of all scavengers for dignified occupations.

<http://safaikarmachariandolan.org/>