

Clean India, Unclean Indians Beyond the Bhim Yatra

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The Safai Karamchari Andolan traversed 500 districts of the country with the message “stop killing us.” The participants, manual scavengers who clean dry latrines, sewers and septic tanks, are forced to carry on this dehumanising work despite laws against it. Will the Swachh Bharat campaign succeed in addressing the issues connected with manual scavenging?

India celebrated the 125th birth centenary of B R Ambedkar on 14 April this year. Continuing the movement he began long ago when he asked the Dalits not to do jobs like manual scavenging, the Safai Karamchari Andolan undertook the *Bhim Yatra* that travelled across the country for 125 days, passing through 500 districts in 30 states. The organisers called it “a journey of pain and anguish, to tell the country” and the government to “stop killing us” (the manual scavengers) in dry latrines, sewers and septic tanks. It is now a widely accepted fact that the dehumanising practice of manual scavenging still continues in spite of laws created to abolish it,¹ and thousands dying in sewers and septic tanks is a reality. The occupation and those engaged in it have been glorified by Mahatma Gandhi and later the Gandhians, who equate “a manual scavenger to a mother taking care of a child.” Prime Minister Modi called it, the vocation of the *Valmikis*, an “experience in spirituality” (*Karmyog* 2007). A Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) member Tarun Vijay, while raising the issue of *safai karamcharis* in the Rajya Sabha, termed them as “cleanliness martyrs.” The dehumanising practices continue to draw the attention of policymakers, judiciary, executive, civil society organisations and the media. However, the ground reality has hardly seen any substantial change or transformation.

Safai Karamcharis and the State

Vijay Prashad (2000) has amply demonstrated that “settling the *Balmikis* in the cities as sanitary workers, and moulding them into accepting this work, has been one of the major achievements; first of the colonial administration, and later on, of the state and political parties” (see also Gooptu 1996). A study of the scavengers of Ahmedabad (D’Souza 2005) reveals that the very process of urbanisation

and the state itself have played significant roles in establishing the members of the marginal castes² as scavengers in urban areas. The occupational history of the respondents and their families shows a drastic shift in occupation among the migrants. Over three generations one observes that the members of the marginal castes from rural areas who were predominantly agricultural labourers in the rural economy are assimilated in the urban labour market as scavengers, first largely in the organised sector in local bodies and then in the informal sector. The processes of urbanisation, and to a certain extent the policies of the state, have been instrumental in diverting a specific caste group to the occupation of scavenging in the cities.

Today when the links between castes and traditional occupation have almost disappeared, urbanisation has made the members of the marginal castes even more closely identified with the scavenging occupation and the local authorities perceive scavengers as indispensable functionaries of the state. Although they are employed in the organised as well as the informal sector, the state is the largest agency which employs and pays over a million scavengers (Macwan 2001). In urban areas, all functions related to sanitation are carried out mostly by the marginal castes and a large majority of them are women (IDSN). They have, therefore, become sweepers and scavengers and a niche has been created for them in the urban areas. Thus, with urbanisation, those engaged in the occupation of scavenging and sanitary work are bestowed with more secular (neutral) status, the *safai karamcharis*. Some social scientists refer to them as “professionals of the city” (Vivek 1998) and in places such as the Delhi Municipal Corporation, they have been called *swasthya kamgar* (the health workers).

During the Bhim Yatra, one of the participants shared the pain and humiliation that he had felt when he went to the government office to get a caste certificate for his child.

It is sad that they want me to clean their toilets, but they don’t want to see my sight when I go to the government office. Recently I visited an office to get a caste certificate for my

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child's educational purpose. The government official told me, 'why do you want the certificate for your child? What will he do with education? He is your child and will continue to take over your work once you leave.'

A number of reports by *Down To Earth*, *Indiaspend.org*, as well as the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis and other organisations working at the grass-roots level (Reports 2012) have revealed that in India, the state is the biggest offender.

Persistence of Untouchability

In accordance with the constitutional provisions, the government has initiated a number of measures for providing protection to the ex-untouchables. In the protective sphere, untouchability was legally abolished (Article 17 of the Constitution) and its practice in any form forbidden by the Untouchability (Offences) Act, 1955. Nearly two decades later, in 1976, the act was reviewed in order to make it more stringent and effective, and was re-enacted as the Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 (Krishnan 2002). This official enactment of abolishing untouchability gave the status of ex-untouchables to the untouchables, but the ground realities did not change. The "attitudinal conversion" as perceived by Mahatma Gandhi among the upper castes did not occur, nor did the annihilation of caste as envisioned by Ambedkar.

In his classic study on the practice of untouchability in the 1970s in Gujarat, I P Desai observed that with the process of modernisation and development, the practice of untouchability was quite low in the "public sphere." However, when it came to traditional relations—this included the domestic and religious life of the people—untouchability was still practised (Desai 1976). A repeat of the study done nearly 25 years later showed that the practice of untouchability had declined in most areas of everyday life. However, as Shah (2002: 145) notes, "one would have expected by now a complete disappearance of untouchability in public transport and post offices as it was not widespread in 1971. But it has not happened. The proportion of the villages observing untouchability

in these spheres has, in fact, slightly increased."

The wide-ranging sociocultural changes accompanying modernity have provided the impression that untouchability as a practice has passed into history. On the contrary, many empirical studies indicate that untouchability continues to be an important component of the experience of Dalithood in contemporary India (Mander 2004). P K Misra (1991) demonstrates through autobiographical descriptions how, in modern secular India, the concepts of purity and pollution remain very much intact. Ramesh Kamble's study of Dalit social experience in the urban setting of Mumbai shows that the social discrimination and economic exploitation they face have not changed even in a metropolis like Mumbai. Rather, it has assumed different forms (Kamble 2002).

Caste Stigma Continues

The association of the marginal caste with the "unclean occupations" has often been viewed as the primary reason for the practice of untouchability. However, the dynamics of caste relations and the practice of untouchability in urban India point to the stigma that has remained an indelible stamp. The empirical evidence of the practices of untouchability confirms that caste continues to matter negatively more for a marginal caste than the other untouchables in contemporary Indian society.

There is no doubt that in urban areas upper-caste groups relate with marginal castes on numerous occasions at workplace and there are increased economic transactions between them today than what was in the past. The practice of untouchability in public domains is not as rigid as it was earlier and not as crude and rampant in the city as it was in villages. However, in domains like inter-caste dining and inter-caste marriages the practice of untouchability with the marginal caste is more stringent and very little change is perceived even in the city. The empirical evidence collected during a study (D'Souza 2005) does show that the occupation of sanitary work and especially manual scavenging is seen as a major reason for untouchability.

Some instances and experiences of untouchability at workplaces that continue even today are: they are not allowed to enter into the house by the upper-caste employer; a distance is maintained in interacting, especially while giving food and water.

In towns and cities, there is far greater anonymity and occupational mobility, which enables blurring of caste identities. On the one hand, it is possible for one to hide his or her identity and thus escape being vulnerable to caste discrimination. However, this is not always possible, as Mander (2004) found out in a number of cities in Madhya Pradesh where urban scavengers continued to be victims of untouchability, precisely because they were denied access to caste anonymity as they continued to adhere to their traditional "unclean" occupations. Bezwada Wilson, National Convener of the Safai Karamchari Andolan said, "when a person died in a septic tank the doctors and police refused to touch the body citing untouchability and pollution."

The practice of untouchability continues even if one moves out of this caste-based occupation. According to some scholars, it was thought that by abandoning "polluting" professions the "untouchable" caste would get rid of their previous stigma after a few generations (Srinivas 1955). However, even after abandoning and diversifying from pollutant traditional professions, the stigma of untouchability remains indelible to a large extent for the ex-untouchables. Some scholars have noted that as restrictions on movement and on entry into superior occupations have declined, at some places "the practice of untouchability in its traditional form has declined significantly, even though it has not disappeared" (Jodhka 2000). Untouchability continues to be widely practised with the marginal caste, even when they have disassociated with the traditional occupation, and have moved to dignified occupations.

Caste-based residential segregation is a well-accepted pattern of spatial distribution in urban centres and the most visible form of caste-based exclusion (D'souza 2015). Housing facilities

exclusively provided to the marginal caste as they were employed as sanitary workers by the state and other institutions have reinforced caste in urban areas. Alongside this, integration of the marginal caste members in the upper-caste residential localities is a rare sight. Even when one is able to afford a house in a mixed locality, acquiring a house is practically impossible. In this context, there is ample evidence that manual scavengers are considered untouchable by other ex-untouchables (Moffat 1979). What Desai observed a quarter of a century ago still remains a social reality: “there is untouchability among the ex-untouchables themselves” (1976).

New Forms of Untouchability

Untouchability to most of the members of the marginal caste is a personal experience. The new forms of untouchability have replaced the old practices. And thus it continues to haunt the urban life of the marginal caste. External matters like physical touch or sitting together for a cup of tea is possible. There are instances of friendly interactions, meetings, discussions, etc. However, invitations to the home to partake of a meal or family ties are still rather rare. In that sense, age-old untouchability is still maintained, but in different forms.

These perceptions of the practice of untouchability in private spheres in the cities have been described as “white untouchability,” a subtle way of expressing safe distance with the marginal caste. The term “white untouchability,” though not so popular, is in circulation among educated members of the community, and is used as a code word. It is also termed as a “refined version” of untouchability expressing “prejudice or hidden agenda” of the upper castes or other Dalit groups against the marginal caste. As one of the respondents graphically explained:

It is not just about physical touch; it is more; depriving us of our rights. The colour ‘white’ does not hurt your eyes; neither does it strike easily to the naked eyes. But it is there. White is also something that stands opposite to crude. The practices of white untouchability are manifested in forms which are not very crude, they are still hurting.

A few examples narrated by the members of the marginal castes are:

(i) A person from the marginal caste community is by-passed, avoided and ignored by progressive Dalit group members or by an upper caste, such as at workplaces.

(ii) Not passing on information about official announcements, schemes, or opportunities that would benefit a member of marginal caste in their offices.

(iii) They are hired as safai karamcharis but are not promoted to higher posts to which they are eligible; do not get jobs in secular occupations although qualified.

iv) Not allowed to buy a house in upper caste localities or in localities of other Dalits even when they can afford to do so.

Beyond Bhim Yatra

It is in this context that the Bhim Yatra focused on the issue of manual scavengers inviting the nation to look beyond the occupation. Men continue to die, not the practice of manual scavenging—and the practices of untouchability and discrimination inherent in it survive. For a large majority of women it is considered part of their destiny to inherit the dehumanising profession—“the custom of the household”—to which they are forced at a young age with their mothers, leaving behind their education and future prospects. They continue to die, with ill-health and the deprivation of basic dignity of life.

Women who suffer the most in this dehumanising profession want to liberate themselves and their children. The Bhim Yatra witnessed a large number of women supporters who travelled across India to convince those engaged in such occupations to leave and campaign against this caste occupation. One of the women participants narrated:

I have been doing this work for many years. Our men go down the septic tank, and we are not sure whether they will come alive or not. Day by day numbers of deaths are increasing and every other day we hear in the news of septic tank death. I have three children and I don’t want them to do this work, I want a life of dignity for me and my children.³

She and thousands of men and women in her community are dreaming of belonging to a clean people of clean India, where attitudes and values of equality, of equal treatment and of equal

opportunities are part of dignified citizenship. Will Swachh Bharat campaign, a pet project of the government, address the heart of the issue, that is, manual scavenging is an “unclean occupation” and needs to be uprooted from its association with caste and untouchability in India?

In years to come protest movements like the Bhim Yatra may succeed in liberating manual scavengers from the inhuman practice and many engaged in manual scavenging may be saved from being killed in the name of “cleanliness” and “hygiene.” One day India, through its Swachh Bharat campaign, may take the matter more seriously to mechanise and modernise the sanitation system with toilets everywhere. But the measure of untouchability that exists in our society will define the extent of “clean (swachh) Bharat” and “clean Indians.” However, a true change of attitude of the clean Indians is beyond the Bhim Yatra.

NOTES

- 1 The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Bill 2013, defines “manual scavenger” as “manual scavenger” means a person engaged or employed, at the commencement of this act or at any time thereafter, by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contractor, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces or premises, as the central government or a state government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed, and the expression “manual scavenging” shall be construed accordingly. The term safai karamchari is used now throughout government records and has gained official, legitimate use.
- 2 Here, the “marginal caste” refers to the caste communities, the lowest of all in the traditional caste hierarchy, closely associated with those engaged in menial jobs, particularly manual scavenging and sanitary services. They are scattered throughout the country and in different parts are known by different names.
- 3 From daily reports on Bhim Yatra circulated by Bezwada Wilson, the National Convener of the Safai Karamchari Andolan through Dalits Media Watch.

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