

'UNCLEAN' OCCUPATIONS: Savaged by Tradition

by
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A central feature of the Indian caste system is the division of labour, or the allocation of occupations, based on one's birth into a particular caste. Traditionally, the caste system permits little occupational mobility between these socially assigned caste-based occupations. Whereas all dalit people are regarded to be ritually 'polluted' simply because of their birth to dalit parents, there are some against them who are the most stigmatized, because of their engagement in socially assigned occupations that are considered ritually 'unclean'.

Among these caste assigned occupations are some categories of work that are culturally regarded as most intensely polluting, unclean and socially degrading. Most of these so-called 'unclean' occupations are associated in one way or another with death, human waste or menstruation, all of which are surrounded by the most dense cultural beliefs of ritual pollution.

It is important to stress what whereas in fact many of these occupations are in reality grossly unhygienic for the worker, their classification as 'unclean' is not based on the physical conditions of sanitation and hygiene of the work. Only those vocations are unclean under the caste system, that are ritually regarded as most polluting. These may also include tasks such as making public announcements by the beat of drum, or making death announcements, which are physically clean, but are considered ritually polluting because of their association with death (dead skin of animals used in drums in the former case, and the death of humans in the latter). It is also misleading to describe these as unclean *occupations* because many are in the nature of unpaid social obligations, and some are forced.

Prevalence of unclean occupations

The ambitious national survey of the status of the practice of untouchability in 12 major Indian states confirmed that dalit people in every state continue to be ensnared into unclean occupations. At the heart of their collective tragedy and angst is the trap in which these most socially oppressed communities among the dalits continue to find themselves even as the country surges into the 21st century. Tradition, feudal coercion and economic compulsions continue to entrap these dalit families across the length and breadth of the country into the most humiliating and socially despised occupations. As we have already observed, these are categories of work that are culturally regarded as most intensely polluting, unclean and socially degrading. Most of the so-called unclean occupations are connected with death, human excreta or menstruation. These three universal physiological processes have been culturally shrouded by beliefs of intense ritual pollution.

The unclean occupations culturally forced upon dalit people that are related to human death include the digging of graves, collection of firewood for the cremation of dead bodies and setting up the funeral pyres. Death is considered so impure and unclean that, in many regions of rural India, it is dalits alone who are required by tradition even to communicate the news of any death to the relatives of the deceased person, whatever maybe the distance.

There are a large number of unclean occupations that derive from the death of animals. In every state that was surveyed, villagers expect dalit people to dispose of carcasses of animals that die in their homes or in the village, whether cattle or dogs or cats. They skin the bodies of dead animals, flay and tan these and develop them into cured leather, and sometimes even craft them into footwear and drums. The pollution associated with leather is so pervasive that in States such as Andhra Pradesh, Rajasthan, Karnataka, Uttar Pradesh and Maharashtra, even the

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beating of drums at weddings, funerals and religious festivals is considered polluting and imposed as a social obligation or caste vocation only on dalits. The logic is carried further in States where public announcements are made in villages by the beat of drum. Even this occupation is considered polluting and is the monopoly of dalits, because of the polluting touch of dried and treated animal skin that is stretched on the drums.

In Andhra Pradesh, animal sacrifice is a polluting task entrusted to dalits. The most humiliating custom, observed in 12 per cent of the villages surveyed, is Gavu Pattadam. This is a ghoulish forced ritual, by which Dalits are required to bite the neck of the animal to kill it. The blood of the animal is then mixed with rice and sprinkled all over the village to keep evil spirits at bay.

A third category of 'unclean' occupations derives from the culturally polluting character of human waste. In every State surveyed, the manual removal of human excreta, often with bare hands, survives as a deeply humiliating vocation despite it having been outlawed. This pollution extends in many cases to cleaning of sewage tanks, drainage canals and the sweeping of streets. The beliefs related to the pollution by menstrual blood results in midwifery and the washing of clothes deemed as unclean occupations in states such as Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Bihar and Maharashtra.

Some unclean occupations are involuntary and unpaid, or paid a pittance. The bearing of death messages and temple cleaning in Tamil Nadu, cleaning up after marriage feasts in Kerala and Karnataka, making leather chappals for people of higher castes as a sign of respect in Andhra Pradesh, and drum-beating and the removal of carcasses in many States are unpaid tasks. Researchers in Orissa report payments of leftover food, old clothes, fistfuls of food grains or petty cash. The researchers from Rajasthan reported that in most villages, cash is rarely paid for traditional unclean work expected from the dalits, instead they are usually given food (usually two *rotis*).

With these exceptions, the survey in most states revealed that unless they are also bonded dalits who still engage in hereditary polluting occupations, today usually negotiate some level of wage payment in cash or kind, although these tend to be low and at times humiliating. The Karnataka survey reports the payment of arrack, a meal and some cash for drum-beating, and fixed cash payments for other tasks like mid-wifery and the lifting of carcasses. Scavengers may be employed on monthly salary by local bodies, otherwise families pay them cash or stale food. Similarly, in Orissa the survey showed that the Ghasis, Panos and Doms involved in leather work and scavenging are landless and most non-dalits and even some of the Dalit farmers refuse to employ them for agricultural wage work.

Physical and psychological impacts

Lifelong engagements in these intensely socially despised – and frequently grossly unhygienic – occupations leave profound physical and psychological scars on people who are forced into this work.

The condition of 'manual scavengers', assigned to collect with their hands human excreta from public and private latrines and open sewers, so moved Mahatma Gandhi that he took to cleaning his own toilet and asked for rebirth as a manual scavenger so that he could help liberate his people from this curse. A century after he called for the abolition of this inhuman practice, it sturdily survives.

According to a survey by the Planning Commission in 1989, there were 75 lakh dry latrines in India. Dry latrines which are no more than a small room in which a hole in the ground opens into a container in a compartment below. The scavenger has to crawl into the compartment and empty out the receptacle, with filth falling all over his body. In pit latrines, faeces collects in a jute bag, which is removed manually (Malekar 1999: 4). Apart from this, public latrines are cleaned mainly by women municipal employees.

Among the estimated 8 million (???) manual scavengers in India is Narayanamma, who worked in a 400 seat public latrine in Anantpur municipality in Andhra Pradesh. From time to time, after the women using the toilet file out, Narayanamma and her fellow workers are called inside. There is no flush. The shit only piles up at each seat, or flows into open drains. It is Narayanamma's job to collect it with her broom on to the flat, tin plate, and pile it into her basket. When the basket is filled, she carries it on her head to a waiting tractor trolley parked at a distance of half a kilometer. And then she is back, waiting for the text call from the toilet. This goes on until about ten in the morning, when at last Narayanamma washed up, and returns home.

The smell of the shit never leaves you, she says, whatever you do, you smell it in your hair, your clothes, even in all that you eat. It is even worse when it rains, and the shit trickles through the basket onto your hair, face and shoulders. That's why we all eat so much betel nut, and, she confesses, drink quantities of country liquor. It is the only way we can live with the shame of our work. *Ai, municipality come, clean this, is how most people call out to Narayanamma and her fellow workers when they walk down the road.*

It is as though we do not have a name, she says. And often they cover their noses when we walk past, as though we smell. We have to wait until someone turns on a municipal tap, or works a hand-pump, when we water, so that these are not polluted by our touch. In the tea-stalls, we do not sit with others on the benches; we squat on the ground separately. Until recently, there were separate broken teacups for us, which we washed ourselves and these were kept apart only for our use. This continues to be the practice in villagers even in the periphery of Anantpur, as in many parts of the state (Mander 2001: 38,39).

Our survey reveals that continued bondage to unclean occupations creates not only deep psychological scars, but also physical health problems. In village Upale Dumala in Solapur, Maharashtra, an elderly man engaged in carcass cleaning reported huge boils and rashes on his shoulders because of carcass carrying. A range of health problems are reported from elsewhere as well, because of the intensely unsanitary character of their vocations, unmitigated by modern technology).

This is confirmed also by report of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights² which states: Needless to say, manual scavengers are exposed to the most virulent forms of viral and bacterial infections which affect their skin, eyes, limbs, respiratory and gastrointestinal systems. TB is rife among the community.

Continuity and Change

The sturdy cultural beliefs in the polluting nature of certain occupations adapt regressively to a range of potentially liberating contemporary developments. For instance, the establishment of leather factories and tanneries has freed dalits significantly from traditional hereditary occupations, but dalits still lift and skin carcasses to sell at a price to leather footwear companies. It is also interesting that leather and tanning factories

have a very high proportion of dalit workers. In cases where the modern economy or municipal management requires the transport of solid waste or carcasses, even the drivers of these vehicles are drawn from the dalit community. Municipal authorities routinely employ only dalit workers for scavenging. Veterinary and medical doctors, unwilling to pollute themselves by touching corpses, even use dalits to perform post-mortems, whereas they only look at the dissected corpses without handling them and unite their reports.

In several cases, dalits who persist in 'unclean' occupations do so as they feel powerless to resist, or even because they accept their caste roles. In Babufasad village in North Orissa, the elected ward member, Chamayu Pathar Khamia, who belongs to the Ghasi caste, sweeps the roads, removes the carcasses and skins dead cattle. In return, he is given a handful of rice, and occasionally money, by the villagers. "If I do not do this kind of work, the non-dalits will threaten me and force me to leave the village. And because of my work, even dalits of the Ganda caste despise me even though we are all Scheduled Castes.

Refusal to perform 'unclean occupations' in the countryside often result in retribution in the form of abuse, assault or social boycott. Even in the absence of such overt coercion, economic compulsions prevent most Dalits from escaping humiliating hereditary occupations. They may earn Rs.200 from skinning a dead buffalo. Scavenging may secure them regular employment in the local bodies.

² Concluding observations of the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination: India CERD/C/304/Add.13, September 17, 1996

The nation was shamed and stunned once again, this time by the merciless slaughter of five Dalit men within the boundary of a police station in Duliiana village in Jhajjar district of Haryana. There is justified, widely shared outrage at the brutality spurred by vicious pseudo-religious communal mobilisation and unashamed state partisanship.

However, the ensuing debate needs also to focus on the reality of the on-going hidden violence and brutal humiliation to which significant numbers of Dalit families are routinely subjected in villages and towns across the country, because of their engagement owing only to their birth in the traditional occupations that are culturally considered degrading and polluting. These occupations continue to be in most parts of India the monopoly of a few Dalit castes, a grotesque perverse legacy for people shunned as the lowest of the low. They are born into the dishonour of these occupations, and die in it, frequently, with no path of escape.

On the evening of October 15, 2002, Devendra and Dayachand, traditional leather-workers, were skinning a dead cow close to the Duliiana police station. With them were animal skin trader Kailash, and the driver and conductor of the hired vehicle in which the carcass was transported, Tota Ram and Raju. All of them were Dalits.

A crowd of villagers gathered near the Duliiana police station, infuriated by a rumour that a cow was being skinned alive. They attacked and gravely injured the Dalit men, who were later dragged to the police station. The policemen failed to evacuate the critically wounded men to safety and render medical attention even after the passage of four hours.

Meanwhile, a tractor-load of young men, who were returning from Dasara celebrations, converged on the police post, and lynched the men, in the presence of three magistrates and at least 60 to 70 police personnel who had been summoned by then. The assembled police force did little to save the lives of the five. The Vishwa Hindu Parishad took out a procession in Jhajjar the following day in defence of the killings, and demanded that no arrests be made. The police have since dragged its feet in making arrests, claiming that it was too dark at the time of the incident to identify the murderers.

The defence of the attackers was that the cow was alive while being skinned by the Dalits, and that it was this outrage of their religious sentiments that fuelled the mob fury. The State administration remained callous and indifferent. Not a single Minister visited the site or condoled with the bereaved families. Dayachand's brother Jogendra broke down while testifying before a joint delegation of Left parties investigating the massacre. "They treated us as though we were families of the criminals, not the victims," he said. "They gave us the brutalised body of our brother - naked. We are poor Dalits, therefore they did not think it necessary to even cover the body of my brother" (Mander 2003).

These secure earnings contain the seeds of the cruel dilemma of the most socially disadvantaged and oppressed Dalits who are trapped in hereditary 'unclean occupations'. Adherence to occupations such as scavenging or disposal of carcasses and human bodies, which are indispensable for any society, but which no other group is willing to perform, bestows them with a monopoly status that gives them greater economic security than many other disadvantaged groups. But this is at the price of the most savage and extreme social degradation. Yet, if they seek to escape this social degradation to achieve dignity, they have to abandon the economic security of their despised occupations to join the vast ranks of the proletariat. This, then, is the core of their dilemma: if they seek economic security, they must accept the lowest depths of social degradation; but if they wish for social dignity, they must accept the price of economic insecurity and deprivation.

Despite the threats of pauperisation, sporadic individual and collective resistance have led to a steady decline in the numbers of dalit families engaged in unclean occupations in most parts of the country. In Tamil Nadu, in 80 per cent of the villages surveyed, only dalits perform the uncleanest of occupations such as carcass removal, grave digging and the cleaning of garbage after festivals. However, the major change reported is that in many cases, these activities are

now performed by few, rather than all. The older generation is more obliging whereas younger dalits resist.

An interesting example was reported from Beguru village in Karnataka. Dalits have negotiated with non-dalits to release them from unclean obligations. The panchayat itself now employs just three dalits on a monthly wage of Rs.700 each, to perform the polluting occupations of drum beating, scavenging, sweeping and removing of dead animals. The remaining dalits in the village have been freed, and have shifted to agricultural wage work, industrial work or have migrated to the cities for work that may liberate them from the indignities of the caste system.

However, escape to the anonymity of cities does not always guarantee liberation from the stigma of unclean occupations. Research in Orissa observed that Dalits in rural unclean occupations sometimes migrate to towns, but even there they find work mainly as road sweepers and drain cleaners. There seems no escape for them from social ostracism. The same trends are reported from other states like Tamil Nadu.

Whereas hereditary unclean occupations for Dalits remain entrenched in the rural social system, cracks are developing. There are many reports of successful resistance from many parts of the country. Some inspiring case studies have come to light even from the feudal outposts of Rajasthan.

In Palri village of Sirohi, the Dalits collectively resolved to refuse to remove the carcasses. The caste Hindus retaliated with a social and economic boycott and violence, but the Dalits held their ground. Today they have freed themselves from this legacy of shame. Likewise, in 2001, the Regar community in Sujarpura village of Sikar refused to lift carcasses. Non-Dalits negotiated and a breakthrough was achieved when in a major rupture from tradition, it was agreed that two persons from each caste would take turns to carry the carcass outside the village. However, it is still left to the Regars to skin the animals.

Likewise, the survey from Tamil Nadu reported that until recently, refusal to perform unclean activities was met with fines, violence or excommunication. However, collective resistance has grown over the past decade, forcing non-Dalits to accept the mobility of these Dalits into the more respected caste-neutral category of agricultural worker.

State Action: Meagre and Halting

Affirmative state action to free dalits from the shackles of degrading hereditary employment has been in evidence only for manual scavenging, possibly because it was passionately opposed by Gandhi. However, the results even of this have been unconscionably meagre and halting. On at least 3 occasions, the government of India banned the practice of manual scavenging, on Gandhi centenary, Gandhi's 125th birth anniversary and Ambedkar centenary with little success.

Navsarjan filed a PIL on behalf of the scavengers in Ranpur town in 1995, one of the main demands was the implementation of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act in Gujarat. The Ranpur case has since become something of a landmark in the campaign for the abolition of manual scavenging in Gujarat.

The state government reacted to the case by denying the existence of the system. This contradicted its own report which admitted that there were 32,000 safai karmacharis who need to be rehabilitated.

The High Court appointed a commission to look into the case of Ranpur scavengers. The municipality reacted by terminating the services of the scavengers on the ground that they were on an 'illegal strike'. Navsarjan filed another case on their behalf asking for the panchayat records. The authorities then offered to reinstate the workers on the condition that they clean the toilets. The offer was rejected; the scavengers asserted that they would never handle human excreta again. In September 1997, the court ruled that it was the panchayat's responsibility to demolish dry latrines and build water-seal latrines.

But Navsarjan's campaign to force the government to respond with more than mere promises continues. According to Ranpur-based social activist Haribhai Vaghela the only benefit of the struggle has been that it put an end to mathemelu on the practice of carrying night soil as a head-load. The issues of manual scavenging and rehabilitation remain. The officials have since been instigating people against the Bhangis by saying 'these people want free wages'. As of today there is no permanent staff in the municipality, though there are 24 vacancies for safai karamcharis. All the 42 scavengers, including 17 women, are daily wage earners.

There are about 35 Bhangi families living in Meghaninagar, Ranpur, separated from the upper caste Darbars, Rajputs and Baniyas. But they are not willing to talk about their plight. "What are you going to do about it?" they ask. "You will write. But we have to coexist with the Darbars" (Malekar 1999).

"A law in 1993 [the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993] declared the employment of scavengers or the construction of dry (non-flush) latrines an offence punishable with imprisonment for up to one year and a fine of two thousand rupees. But the fate of this statute was similar to that of so many laws that are passed by Indian legislatures, which favour or protect the very poor and marginalised. These laws are rarely even acknowledged, let alone enforced. Narayanamma herself works as an employee of the municipality district town of Anantpur of Andhra Pradesh. According to records of the state government, there are no dry latrines in the state of Andhra Pradesh. But in Anantpur we found that dry latrines were being operated by the local government itself, and cleaned by its own employees. The irony of the government openly flouting its own laws is lost upon Narayanamma. Not only does the government maintain day latrines, in Anantpur as in many other parts of the country, it thinks nothing of employing as scavengers only members of designated castes who are traditionally assigned this responsibility " (Mander 2001: 38,39).

Even though banned by the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (prohibition) Act, 1993, in many homes across the country, dalits from hereditary scavenging classes, mainly women, continue to remove human shit with their bare hands from dry latrines, whereas men clean septic tanks of wet latrines. They enter most homes from rear doors, and after they complete their work, they leave silently. They are not expected to talk to anyone in the house. In 1997, the statutory National Commission

for Safai Karamcharis observed that manual scavengers are 'totally cut off from the mainstream of progress' and are still 'subjected to the worst kind of oppression and indignities' (Mander 2003).

The UN Commission on Human Rights adds: "In 1992, the Government launched a national scheme that called for the identification, training, and rehabilitation of a *safai karamcharis* (the official name given to manual scavengers) throughout the country. However, in 1997 they, reported that progress has not been altogether satisfactory", and had benefited only "a handful of safai karamcharis and their dependents. One of the reasons for unsatisfactory progress of the Scheme appears to be inadequate attention paid to it by the State Governments and concerned agencies". When confronted with the existence of manual scavenging and dry latrines within their jurisdiction, state governments often deny their existence altogether or claim that a lack of water supply prevents states from constructing flush latrines. This despite the fact that a sum of Rs. 4,640,00,000 (US\$ 116 million) was allocated to the scheme under the Government's Eighth Five Year Plan. Activists claim that the resources, including government funds, exist for construction and for the rehabilitation of scavengers; what is lacking is the political will to do so. Members of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis consider it imperative that the commission be "vested with similar powers and facilities as are available to the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes." (ibid, p). Currently the Commission only has advisory powers and no authority to summon or monitor cases (UN 2002).

Young dalit men in a meeting with left parties in Jhajjar in 2002 to mourn the massacre of the five leather workers at the hands of the bigoted mob, gave words to the depths of their mortification and anger. 'These Hindus, they make us do their dirty work and then deprive us of even a minimum of dignity'. Another added, 'If they love their animals so much, let them pick up the carcasses and bury them with full rites'.

The extent to which his words unknowingly echoed those of Dr. Babasaheb Ambedkar decades earlier reflects how stubborn is the survival of the most oppressive elements of our troubled tradition. He had said, 'You take the milk from the cows and buffaloes, and when they are dead, you expect us to remove the dead animals. Why? When you can carry the dead bodies of your mothers, why can you not carry the dead bodies of your 'mother cows', yourselves?' (Mander 2003).

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