

## *India's Waste Disposal: A Major Threat To The Lives Of Dalit Women*

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### **ABSTRACT**

India's waste generation is one of the fastest in the whole world. Hundreds of waste workers are required to manage the waste produced, and these workers come from the most economically and socially backward communities of the country. The poorest risk their lives in achieving aesthetic appeal of the cities by working in dump yards, railway tracks, rag picking, and manual scavenging. Waste disposal is seen as a natural occupation of the low caste, tribes, and Dalits, which is passed on from one generation to another. The lower caste group is seen to be coterminous with dirt, filth, and pollution. Therefore, 'caste' and 'waste' have a "cultural relationship" based on the notions of 'purity' and 'impurity' (Doron and Jeffrey 2018).

Sarfaraz (2017) estimates that "out of all those engaged in manual removal of human excreta 95% are women". This essay argues that India's waste disposal severely affects the health and livelihood of the lower caste women. It also explores how waste affects women more than men and studies the possible solutions to overcome this problem in India. This essay, therefore, studies the intersectionality between caste, waste, and gender in India.

*Keywords:* Waste, Caste, Intersectionality, Gender

### **INTRODUCTION**

Barbara Harris-White defines waste as "the materials and substances without value," which are found "in all acts of material production, distribution, and consumption, in the production of labour and social reproduction" (March 2016 a). India's waste generation is one of the fastest in the whole world. Waste has been seen as the product of modern capitalism and an increase in world population. With urbanisation, improvement in living standards and an increase in wealth of people, waste generation has accelerated at a rapid rate (Hoornweg *et al.*, 2013). It has been generated as a result of lack of technology, inability to garner funds by the state for waste disposal, improper management and planning about waste. It is believed that the waste generation is higher in urban areas than in rural areas due to mass manufacturing and buying of commodities in urban areas. The various kinds of waste materials include gaseous waste, liquid waste, and solid substances. They may be biodegradable or non-biodegradable, recyclable or non-recyclable. It is very unfortunate that society neglects the workforce and hard work required in waste management. Hundreds of waste workers are required to manage the waste produced, and these workers come from the most economically and socially backward communities of the country. Gill (2010, 219) argues that due to the emergence of "bourgeois environmentalism, the middle and upper classes

...push their own agendas of a visually pleasing and cleaner city, often at the expense of the marginalized.” The poorest risk their lives in achieving aesthetic appeal of the cities by working in dump yards, railway tracks, rag picking, and manual scavenging. Caste-based discrimination can be seen in the act of manually cleaning dry toilets by the lower castes. It is seen as a natural job of these manual scavengers to clean human waste and carry it on their head in baskets for disposal away from the residential areas. The lack of sanitation facilities forces the Dalits/ lower castes to take up this disgusting job. This essay argues that India’s waste disposal severely affects the health and livelihood of the lower caste women. It also explores how waste affects women more than men and studies the possible solutions to overcome this problem in India.

To address my essay question, I have divided the essay into five parts. The first section describes how formal and informal waste sectors function and their repercussion on the livelihoods of the waste workers. The second section analyses the theme of intersectionality between caste, waste, and gender. The third section discusses the dangers faced by women waste workers. Further to that, the fourth section focusses on the laws that have been passed for the protection of the waste workers and how far they have been implemented in actual practice. The fifth section discusses the possible solutions to improve the condition of these waste workers and ways to uplift them socially and economically.

### **FORMAL AND INFORMAL WASTE ECONOMY**

The Indian urban waste economy is broadly divided into the formal and informal sectors. My essay focusses on the informal economy, which accounts for the activities unregistered by the state and ignored by the ones in power. It is also seen as “linked to the global finance through unrecorded capital fleeing to offshore financial centers, some of which returns, laundered and readied for investment subsidies” (Harris-White, March 2016 b). Cleaning public waste is the responsibility of the municipality, the state. But because of the immense increase in waste generation, the government is unable to meet the public expenditure on waste treatment because of a shortage of revenue. The decline in Municipal Sanitation Workforce by 40% has also been recorded due to the lack of funds and technology (ibid.). Liberalisation has led the decline of the public sector, and this has generated a number of independent privately-owned agencies. It is due to this that a number of unregistered workers and agents have evolved. They are not dependent for work on the registered firms and are usually self- employed. They belong to the most stigmatised and marginalized community as their working conditions are deplorable, dangerous and un-

creditworthy. The informal workers work under un-registered firms that are run by wholesalers and self-employed agents who choose to work independently in order to avoid the costs involved in the registered sector (Harris-White, April 2016). This informal waste economy runs on money as the waste collected is sold to dealers, for it to be recycled and re-commodified. This sector thus involves a lot of concerns because of lack of laws to protect the environment, tax evasion, neglect of health conditions of workers. The provision of uniforms, gloves, masks and other safety instruments are neglected. Since the state does not regulate this sector, the work is more dangerous, dirty and involves the lowest pay and benefits.

Another way in which the labour force is employed in the waste economy is through the exploitative nexus formed between the formal and informal groups. Firms registered with the state, in many cases, use labour to clean hospitals, railways, dump yards by contacting unregistered dealers. This agreement is done to reduce the private firm's costs and ensuring high rates of returns. It also helps the municipality to reduce its expenditure on public services. Subcontracting helps them get labour at a very cheap cost. The labour is usually unskilled and is also not provided any employment rights. The women are usually paid cash in kind, unlike men. They bear the burden of feeding their children and hence, are forced to take up such jobs.

The labour force and especially women are doubly oppressed in both the cases of informality and the contract between registered and unregistered firms. The next section of my essay throws more light on this argument.

### **INTERSECTIONALITY OF CASTE, WASTE, AND GENDER**

Indian society follows a hierarchical caste-based system. Brahmins (priests) occupy the highest position in the caste-based society. They are followed by the Kshatriyas (warriors) and the Vaishyas (landowners and merchants). The Shudras (servants) and the Untouchables (cobblers, toilet cleaners, sweepers, rag pickers) occupy the lowest position in society. According to this hierarchy, it may not be wrong to gather that 'caste,' and 'waste' has a "cultural relationship" based on the notions of 'purity' and 'impurity' (Doron and Jeffrey 2018). Waste disposal is naturally reserved for low caste, tribes, and Dalits. Therefore, caste status and occupation are highly correlated with each other. Lower caste is seen to be coterminous with dirt, filth, and pollution. Caste determined occupation has been carried on from generation to generation and it has been difficult to find alternative occupations by the lower caste communities. For example, the *chamars* would do

leather related occupation; the *bhangis/chuhras* would be involved in scavenging, removal of dead animals and sweeping. The lower castes are seen to be born for these polluting jobs, and it is like a family tradition for them. Doron and Jeffrey argue that “caste prejudice compounds widespread discrimination against a ‘wasted’ underclass of Dalits, landless migrants and poor Muslims...waste is therefore not only about economic practices and political compulsions but also central to cultural beliefs, especially the interplay of relations among genders, classes, and castes” (2018,13).

Waste, caste, and gender can be seen as interrelated. The cultural relationship between waste and class deeply impacts the women population of India. Sarfaraz (2017) estimates that “out of all those engaged in manual removal of human excreta 95% are women”. Since waste removal is seen as a hereditary occupation of lower caste communities, girls are doubly doomed. Their occupation reduces their chances of marrying into other castes. “Dalit mother-in-law feels very proud in giving a scavenging basket and broom as a first gift to the daughter-in-law, as a part of her legacy” (Doron and Jeffrey 2018, 72). There is also an internalisation of these traditions and occupational status from a very young age. The maximum burden of waste is carried by women as their caste makes it impossible for them to find other occupations or become economically stable. Most of the female labour force is employed as domestic workers in upper-class households. While it is easier for men to find employment in industries, local shops, and other occupations, women continue to work as waste cleaners. The next section of the essay discusses the dangers which women face as waste workers.

### **DANGERS TO WOMEN WASTE WORKERS**

Tax evasion, profit maximisation has led to the shrinking of the public sector. The waste workers do not find any alternative than to surrender themselves to the mercy of the private agents. They do not find proper access to state banks, legal systems and they have to rely upon the private sector even when they are lowly paid and are utterly discriminated. Women are paid half the wages earned by men. Work involves discrimination in terms of the distribution of endowments, assets, medical care and also education. Society associates waste as the natural occupation of lower castes and treat them with the utmost disrespect. Douglas (2003) says, “when a large number of people defecate in public they do so in a space that is expected to be cleaned by sweepers.” These “expectations” are made on the basis of caste differences and because the upper caste considers the lower caste groups as deficient, unworthy, dirty and polluting. There have been cases when there have been complaints against them for touching the property inside railway compartments.

A Caste Association President in Tamil Nadu says, “they don’t have to reserve these jobs because this is stinking work and no one else is willing to do it” (Harris-White and Rodrigo, n.d.). Women waste workers are often denied water from upper caste households after long hours of burdensome work. They are cursed and insulted by the upper caste women. People throw stones at them or even set dogs after them.

Out of the many physical dangers involved in the waste economy, some of them involve cleaning very deep drains, which might contain hazardous material like broken glass, sharp items, etc. The cleaning of bio-medical waste involves cleaning of body parts, blood, syringes, which carry various infections for which the workers are not immune. No protective masks and gloves are provided. The work is burdensome and is disgusting. The pay is very meagre, and no benefits are provided, and the women workers are routinely harassed by the employers. They are criminalised by being always accused of stealing. Women workers are easily captured by the police and are more prone to rapes and beatings. They are continuously harassed and exploited by officials and agents. Even in the daytime, they fear working due to the sexual assaults faced by them. There have been many cases when the landowners benefit when women defecate in open fields. Their excrement turns into fertiliser, and they are threatened by landowner’s sexual advances.

They live in miserable housing conditions, lack proper water and food supplies. They also face dangers from polluted lakes and dump yards, which they have to clean because of being infected by mosquitoes and other insects, which lead to skin and body infections. Diseases like TB, asthma, urinary tract problems, sepsis, and heart problems are widespread in the waste workers because of the enormous toxicity of the dump yards, cleaning of flies infected excrement and carrying heavy loads of waste on their shoulders out of the city Harris-White (March 2016 b) in her essay raises the issue of reduced life expectancy as “90% of the municipal sanitation workers die before the retirement age of 58”.

Apart from the physical dangers faced by the workers, there are significant social and mental problems that they face. Illiteracy and unawareness are big concerns. Since they lack education, they are unable to take collective action against the injustices done to them. They are unable to raise their voice against lack of uniforms, protective equipment, low wages and lack of basic working rights. Their lives are so miserable that they wish that their successive generations

do not get involved in this menial task. But education, which seems the only way out of this agony, is also denied to them as they are stigmatised. The status and the occupation of the parents continues to be a blot on the child's career and life. Dalit students are discriminated in classrooms and educational institutes.

Another problem is social discrimination in public places and government facilities. They have not sanctioned loans for education and for sustaining their families. They have to queue up for hours to receive medical facilities, ration cards, and banking facilities. They are treated brutally by the people who are more educated and socio-economically better off.

How do these workers then deal with these enormous physical and social dangers? One way to deal with the hazardous conditions is by resorting to alcoholism. Both men and women have alcohol before leaving for the disgusting work that they are doomed to do. Alcoholism is a way to decrease body pain and numb their senses. They sometimes have to dispose of the human corpses and alcohol works as psychological preparation for the horrific task. The long hours of work, stinking and disgusting places force them to consume alcohol. This, too, leads to the deterioration of their health by reducing life expectancy and also leads to mental illness. Alcohol also adds their expenses as they have to carry out the dirty work and hence reduces their amount of earnings to sustain their livelihood. It is utter poverty and helplessness that makes the waste workers internalise the intolerable conditions as they lack hope for any improvement in their livelihood.

### **STATE INTERVENTION?**

Even when laws are passed, their implementation and results need to be questioned. On September 6, 2013, the Indian Parliament passed The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act (Human Rights Watch, 2014). Even when the law banned manual scavenging, many parts of the country have men and women still carrying out this horrendous job. The social and economic discrimination in this sector persists and is enforced by the village councils, Panchayats and Municipal Corporation. The traditional caste-based work cannot be put to an end even when the law prohibits it. The workers fear to face the insult by their household owners and the local authorities. They fear to lose their daily bread, and this job seems to be the only source of livelihood to them as other job opportunities are denied. The Human Rights Watch (2014) records that "women who clean dry toilets in rural areas sometimes receive little or no cash

wages, reflecting long-established customary practices, but instead receive daily rations of leftover food, grain, old clothes” (12). Denying access to them in areas to collect water and other places of worship violates basic human rights. They are treated like animals and are insulted by the use of foul and disrespectful language by the household owners. For these poor workers, leftover food is the only source of subsistence as they do not even receive cash for the hard work. They are thus socially excluded and treated unjustly by the dominant classes even when the law doesn't allow it. “According to National Advisory Council, almost nobody has been punished for perpetrating manual scavenging” after the passing of the 2013 Act for abolishing manual scavenging (2014, 42). Denial of manual scavenging by the workers also involves violent treatment towards them by the upper castes. Policies are not implemented correctly because of the bureaucratic control and ignorance towards these workers. The hypocrisy of the lawmakers is reflected by sharing of budgets and financial transfers between the state government, municipality and private companies (Harris-White, April 2016).

The growing concern amongst the upper class for the aesthetic beauty of the cities has been at the expense of these poor waste workers. Gill (2010, 220) argues that the “green agenda of the upper class prioritised over livelihood opportunities and well-being of the disadvantaged groups.” One such example is the *Swachh Bharat Abhiyan* (Clean India Initiative) started by Prime Minister, Narendra Modi in 2014 which aims at making India clean and improving public sanitation by constructing millions of toilets in rural areas in India by 2019. Modi has roped in celebrities, businesspeople and has spent crores of rupees for this initiative which has led to a complete silencing of the toil of the waste workers. The initiative faces criticism as it “lacks a holistic human rights approach” (Rediff 2017) because even when many toilets are being made, caste-based discrimination exists in accessing the toilets. Crores of rupees have been spent on the initiative's advertisement rather than focusing on improving the livelihoods of waste workers. Many manual scavenger's deaths recorded have also been recorded since then (Deep 2017). The political agenda of development envisaged by certain political groups have therefore deprived the livelihood of the poor.

### **POSSIBLE SOLUTIONS**

This kind of stigmatising treatment and lack of social, economic and health safety for the waste workers is a matter of grave concern in contemporary times. The social stratification according to castes in the informal waste economy sector leads to denial of basic working and human rights for



the workers. One of the major steps for curbing the problem of social discrimination is through the mode of education, public information and awareness camps. Educational institutes should not allow any discriminatory practices and should allow equal access to people from all castes, including access to toilets for girls in schools. The state government departments should keep a check on the workings of the local authorities such as panchayats, district collectors and the police. The differences in interests and the lack of coordination between the state and local governments lead to discriminatory practices against the lower castes. The government's budget should be allocated efficiently so that the municipality gets enough revenue to improve the condition of those worker's living standards, modernise sanitation and improve health conditions. Small loans should be made available to waste workers. There should be regular health check-ups for the workers, including nutrition camps and menstrual hygiene awareness. More protective measures such as gloves, suitable footwear and masks should be taken for the workers. Also, the amount of wages paid to the women waste workers should be checked continuously. The government should come up with new employment opportunities for the waste workers in other sectors of the economy in order to provide them with stable income. If more improvements in technology for waste management are made, hundreds of workers can be uplifted and shifted to other work spheres.

### CONCLUSION

The hard labour of the waste workers has not only led to the beautification of cities but has also contributed to making the environment less polluted. It has led to the profit maximisation of the scrap traders, plastic recyclers, merchants, politicians, and industrialists. Doron and Jaffrey (2018, 242) also argue that the waste workers have helped in making millions of rupees for municipal corporations by saving their transport and waste management costs. The waste economy in India is, therefore, helping some sections of the country in making millions at the expense of those disadvantaged sections who risk their lives every day. Unless the society recognises their toil and works towards improving their livelihoods, the waste workers will remain exploited.

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