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India's Worlds of Waste - II

Caste and Gender: The Social Barriers to Solid Waste Management in India¹

The paper explains the indignities and deeply-held attitudes that stigmatise those who deal with waste, garbage and human excreta in India. It outlines how such attitudes make the goals of the 'Swachh Bharat' or 'Clean India' campaign difficult to achieve. It argues, however, that a zero-waste strategy, which improves public sanitation and the dignity of workers, has had some success.

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¹ This paper arises from a workshop on "India's Worlds of Waste", organised in Singapore by the Institute of South Asian Studies (ISAS), an autonomous research institute at the National University of Singapore, on 27 and 28 July 2015. An executive summary of the dialogue at the workshop has been published as ISAS Special Report No.28 on 17 September 2015.

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Solid Waste Management in India is still considered as an extension of manual scavenging. Manual scavenging is the process of removal of human excreta from dry toilets using brooms and tin plates.¹ The scavengers used to transport them by head load to faraway places for disposal.

According to Socio Economic Caste Census 2011, 180,657 households are engaged in manual scavenging for a livelihood. The 2011 Census of India found 794,000 cases of manual scavenging across India. The state of Maharashtra, with 63,713, has the largest number of households working as manual scavengers, followed by the states of Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Tripura and Karnataka.

Ancient scriptures suggest that this practice prevailed in the Indian subcontinent and was one of the duties of war prisoners and slaves. According to such scriptures and other literature, scavenging by some specific caste of India existed from the beginning of civilisation. One of the fifteen duties of slaves enumerated in *Naradiya Samhita* was manual scavenging. This continued during the Buddhist and Maurya period.² Later this duty was assigned to a section of the community who were (and are) economically and politically weak – the lowest strata in the caste system. Those people were considered ‘untouchable’ and not allowed to engage in any livelihood other than this.

The advent of flush toilets, drainage systems and septic tanks should have eliminated the practice of scavenging, and in 1993 a law – The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prevention) Act 1993 – was framed to prevent manual scavenging. But still it is continued in many places. Urbanization in India increased the demand for people to take up such jobs, and it often became the job of those unfortunate people from slums or weaker sections of society due to poor social and economic conditions. Even today cleaning of public drainage and manholes in most Indian cities are done manually with a bare minimum of facilities for safety and hygiene.

As a result, waste management is considered a job of the ‘lower class’ and those who do waste management belong to the ‘lower class’. Though Mahatma Gandhi tried to break this mind-set with his own example, the social status of people engaged in waste management is almost same as that suffered by manual scavengers centuries ago.

Most Indian cities have their waste processing or dumping yards located in places where Scheduled Castes, other marginalized communities and Muslims live. A majority of the workers in public sanitation in municipalities belong to socially backward classes. Though waste management is an important environmental service which makes a major contribution to public health, the age-old attitude and low priority for waste management keeps the status and wages of a waste worker extremely low. These workers tend to settle down in slums since they cannot afford the cost of living in the city, or they stay in villages outside the city and this increases their budget for transportation. This vicious circle casts a dark shadow over generations.

Women in India do not enjoy equal status in the family and society. There are unwritten rules and practices set by religion and culture that limit the rights and freedom of women. It is almost the same across major religions and economic classes. Women are considered to be inferior to men in the work place and are often paid lower wages for the same work. Manual scavenging and solid waste management thrive on cheap labour by employing women and elderly people.³

It is considered abnormal in India for a man to wash clothes for his wife or to sweep and clean the home or to cook food for the family. These functions are considered feminine. In an average Indian family it is quite natural for girls to be told to wash clothes for their brothers. But not the other way round. This phenomenon is in a way an extension of the caste system, where the 'weak' have to do the menial job or be slaves for the strong. Women are considered to be weak and considered to be slaves. It is subtle but very deep-rooted in society.

In short, in India 'waste management' is associated with 'lower caste' and 'feminine'. And anyone who gets engaged in waste management will be considered 'lower' than others or 'feminine' in nature. This social barrier in waste management in India discourages people's participation, especially the involvement of males. People often complain on health grounds about a community waste bin or community compost bin in their neighbourhood, but the underlying fact is the caste and gender aspect. A common waste bin or community compost facility in India still symbolizes the caste system and gender divide. And in contemporary terms, it is not cool to have such things in one's neighbourhood.

Repositioning services related to waste management is crucial. The tasks involved in recycling, composting and dealing with waste need to be treated as skilled jobs for resource recovery and conservation, and workers need to have the chance to acquire appropriate training. This will upgrade a scavenger to a technician and or an environmental manager. Backing for such programmes from social heavyweights and key institutions helps to overcome barriers and promote changed ideas and practices. Motivating educated youth to get involved in this sector also helps to erase taboos.

These are not impossible dreams. “Zero waste” projects in towns in Kerala have achieved promising results. Led by Dr T M Thomas Isaac, MLA and former minister for Finance, the town of Alappuzha managed remarkable changes in urban cleanliness, waste reduction and improved status for waste workers within two years. “Earlier I used to mop up and load the dirt in trucks,” a municipal worker told an *Indian Express* reporter. “Now I find dignity in my job”.⁴

Conclusion

Any campaign to initiate responsible management of waste in India needs to address these social barriers and should have strategies to overcome them. It is not a simple thing since the mind-set of people is steeped in myths and customs which are thousands of years old. “Solid waste management” is an outdated and failed approach. Repositioning “solid waste management” – inducing people to see the processes differently – needs to happen. The emphasis should be on resource conservation and management. “Zero-waste” is the idea that needs to become part of people’s mind-sets. It promotes ethical, efficient and economical resource use and management. “Zero-waste” is a creative idea and productive practical approach which appeals to people once they understand its principles and advantages.

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