

MANUAL SCAVENGING -- STARK REALITY OF CONTEMPORARY INDIA: A STUDY OF SITAPUR (UP)

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ABSTRACT

Manual scavenging is a stark reality of contemporary India. The aim of the study was to understand the socio-economic status of scavengers residing in Sitapur District (UP). The study includes men and women who are or have done manual scavenging at some point in their lifetime. As the first act of deconstruction of dry latrines came 22 years ago in 1993, it was imperative to understand the transition from dry latrines to sanitary, the lives and day to day struggles of manual scavengers and also the continuation of caste-based occupation in form of sanitary toilets. The study was quantitative in nature with a descriptive design and a sample size of 60 men and women. A primary method of data collection was adopted following the semi-structured interview schedule. Literacy level among the manual scavengers is found to be minimal. 57 percent were illiterate and are unable to take primary level education due to poverty and simultaneously drop out of school. 48 percent of respondents are unable to afford to school for their children. 93 percent of the respondents have no other source of income whereas 87 percent deny the feasibility of other alternative occupation due to the existence of untouchability.

KEYWORDS: Dalit, Caste, Manual Scavenging, Untouchability, Dry Toilets

INTRODUCTION

An egalitarian society remains a dream every society from the simplest to most complex has some form of social inequality. Social stratification is one form of social inequality. It refers to the presence of social groups which are ranked above one another usually in terms of power, prestige and wealth their member possesses. The Indian caste system is one such form of stratification, hierarchically divided into four varnas or caste and an outcaste. Caste is an ascribed status given to an individual since birth and demarcates them in terms of their occupation. The fifth group of the varna system or the outcaste are involved in menial jobs such as sweeping, picking up human excreta and carrying night soil on their heads, and their occupation is known as manual scavenging.

Manual scavenging is a forced caste-based occupation which is still a persistent fact in many parts of the country. Many government initiatives have either failed or haven't been able to sustain themselves in preserving the human rights of the manual scavenger community. The main objectives of the study are to understand the accessibility and affordability of basic necessities among manual scavenging community and to understand the challenges faced by them to find an alternative occupation. Manual scavenging is not only the violation of human rights but also shatters the dignity of an individual. After much technological advancement in the county during the 21st century, there is still a community which is authorized to clean human and animal excreta due to their ascribed caste.

The present study aims to understand the socio-economic status of manual scavengers in Sitapur (UP). The study includes men and women who are and have been involved in the manual scavenging at some point in their lifetime. It focuses on three elements of understanding the socio-economic status namely, education, income, and occupation. Persistent untouchability faced by this community has restricted their social and economic mobility restricting them for alternative occupation. Singh (2009) in his study, 'Manual scavenging as the Social exclusion: A case study', describes manual scavenging as a caste and occupation-based social exclusion. The study conducted in the Ghazipur district of Uttar Pradesh revealed the low literacy level of women (48 percent) as compared to men (72 percent). The study also discussed the restriction of social mobility among the people where they are not allowed to dine and interact with higher caste groups and are situated outside the main residential areas. Such discrimination and the vicious cycle of caste discrimination still continues in various parts of the nation hindering the progress of certain communities based on religious and theological sentiments.

Caste and Untouchability

Caste is an ascribed status, which could give power and prestige to some and discrimination and untouchability to others. Untouchability is an action of not being around with a person or group based on their caste, which is a result of their forced caste-based occupation, demeaned by the society. The Navsarjan Trust and Kennedy center for justice and human rights (2010) conducted a study of 1589 random villages and revealed the persistent practice of untouchability not only practiced by the upper castes but also by the relatively upper sub-caste Dalits. The report further mentioned the failure of the existing legal system to address the problem of untouchability. Caste-based untouchability not only restricts the social mobility but economic as well. Massachusetts Institute of technology (2006)¹ in their report mentions that due to the beliefs of pollution and untouchability, manual scavengers are often denied health care and education.

Baruah (2014) talks about manual scavenging as a caste-based and hereditary occupation for Dalits (untouchables), which is predominantly linked with forced labor or slavery. Manual scavengers are often not allowed to do some alternative occupation due to the persistent stigma of untouchability attached to them. They are thus forced by the society to remain in the occupation of manual scavenging and picking up human excreta for their own survival and succumb to the situation created by the society and compromise with their human rights. The Dalit community has been suffering from egregious caste discrimination, in addition to being targets of physical and sexual violence. They are often forced to eat and drink from separate containers in restaurants and even homes (Hanchinamani, 2001).

'Bhangi', a derogatory term is often used majorly in Gujarat as well as other parts of the country for manual scavengers. Thekaekara (2003) writes, 'According to an old gazetteer, the term Bhangi came from change or broken. Bhangi implied a community whose character was broken or destroyed. In rural communities, non-Dalits further humiliate them by calling them bhangiya which conveys a connotation of hatred, sense of contempt and helplessness' (p. ii).

Education and Health

Basic education and health facilities have strongly been promoted by the state for all. The extreme relevance of the outreach of facilities such as education and health is imperative to understand. Sridhar (2011), pointed in a paper series on Dalit Households about their relatively poor access to official sources of credit, their lack of command over assets and

amenities, and lower levels of employment and income. Another study conducted by Rawat et al. (2007) in a survey conducted of 117 scavengers in the Gorakhpur region of Uttar Pradesh revealed that only 27 percent of the children were literate whereas leaving 73 percent to illiteracy also adding to the total illiteracy level of the community to 76 percent. This illiteracy has resulted in the virtual isolation of community from the rest of the society and in the continuous grip of superstition and backwardness.

The persistent practice of untouchability towards the scavenging community has continuously hindered the progress of the community whether it is in the terms of education or in health. In few of the studies, it was noted that the children of the scavenging community face extreme discrimination in school by teachers as well as peer groups. Most of the children drop out due to extreme poverty and are engaged in manual scavenging whether it is cleaning septic tanks, sewers just like their ancestors. Narayanaswamy et al (2009-2010) in his study conducted with the children of scavengers in Tamil Nadu notes that 24 percent of the children dropped out of the school out of which 3/4th were boys and 1/4th were girls. The author also notes that unfavorable attitude of teachers towards the children of manual scavengers and branding them as the children 'unfit' for education and in result children develop an aversive feeling towards their school as their behavior is criticized and condemned by teachers.

According to a report by Jan Sahas Development (2014), the scavenging community has very less access to government health facilities. The survey conducted in the three states of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, and Uttar Pradesh stated that 25 percent respondents from all the three states had access to health services while 75 percent were deprived of this facility. In Bihar, 68 percent never approached government health centers whereas in Madhya Pradesh the percent of non-availing the government health services were 77 percent and Uttar Pradesh 81 percent respectively.

Stigma and Powerlessness

The stigma attached to the forced caste-based occupation is prominent resulting the residential areas of the scavenging community on the periphery of the town. Singh (2009) stated in his study conducted in Ghazipur (UP) that scavengers are mostly situated outside the main residential area and they dwell in very poor and unhygienic conditions. Where most of the scavenging community lives on the periphery, they are simultaneously deprived of basic necessities of housing, sanitation, electricity, and food. Sridhar (2011) in his paper series on 'Dalit Household' in rural India demonstrated the inequality in terms of access to basic amenities such as housing, water, sanitation and electricity faced by Dalits.

Although many government schemes to provide basic amenities are prominent but their accessibility and availability in many parts of the country pose a serious question when it comes to existing poverty and hindered the progress of the marginalized community. Rawat, et AL (2007) in their survey of manual scavengers conducted in the Gorakhpur region of Uttar Pradesh revealed that 69 percent of the community member had no ration card, whereas 31 percent had PAL (Above poverty line) ration card. A report submitted by Jan Sahas Development society (2014) stated that 54 percent of the respondents in Bihar were unable to access the Public Distribution system, whereas the respondents in Madhya Pradesh (30) and Uttar Pradesh (36) were deprived of subsidized grains. The report also stated that 50 percent of the manual scavenging families had no other source of income. The situation was worst in Uttar Pradesh were 83 percent of families relied on manual scavenging for income while in Madhya Pradesh and Bihar 32 percent and 37 percent of the families respectively relied on manual scavenging.

Thus, the study further aims to fill the existing gaps by portraying the existing fact of untouchability in an urban space such as sitarist, it further elaborates the leading result of untouchability in finding alternative occupation for the scavengers and their children. The study also develops an understanding of the vicious cycle of caste discrimination towards the community as well as the upcoming new generation, hindering their access to education and falling back again into the pit of manual scavenging as their caste occupation.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research questions upon which I wanted to delve were the existence of manual scavenging even after its prohibition in 1993, the current occupation of those who were involved earlier, the occupation of their children if above 18, their socio-economic condition ranging from education, health and occupation, access and availability to basic amenities and the existence of untouchability after so many years, if there is any hindrance to avail government benefits of subsidized grains, health facilities, and education, whether they are availing the provision of reservation in education and job employment.

The descriptive research design was used in the study as the aim of the research was to study about manual scavengers in depth while understanding the various related and interrelated phenomenon about issues such as basic amenities of education, health, and sanitation as well as social mobility to find alternative occupation. Descriptive research design allowed to various variables in regard to manual scavengers such as forced labor, alcoholism, low quality of life and restricted social relationships. There is a large number of atrocities against Dalits quoted in numerous national dailies and journals which helped to highlight the core need of the study. The study has undertaken a wide range of issues making it more categorized, representative and descriptive. The study included scavengers of all ages of men and women who are and were involved in the manual scavenging at some point irrespective of the time. The residential areas of the community spread in five areas of Sitapur which includes; Valeda, Sadat Lazar, La Kurt, Guiyang Valhalla and Chitchat cinema Hall. It should be noted that all these areas are the clusters where the Dalit community resides.

The study has a sample size of 60 men and women who have been involved in the scavenging work. A primary method of data collection was used for the research adopting semi-structured interview schedule with open and closed-ended questions. Frequent home visits were undertaken during and before the research process. The method of sampling was Convenience Sampling of Non-Probability Sampling, which gave the liberty in choosing respondent and also allowed the researcher with willingness and availability of the respondents to achieve the target of the study. Manual scavenging is a burning issue and against law. The study in no means directed to take away the livelihood of any person involved. Most of the respondents interviewed themselves wish to leave the work but are forced to attain this occupation due to the non-acceptability in the community.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The practice of manual scavenging is an existent fact in the Sitapur District. Although it has been prohibited in accordance with the law, there are still some households where the practice of untouchability is prominent. It is more prominent in the household where the sanitary toilets are unavailable and people are practicing open defecation, as women don't go out to defecate they usually have small places assigned in their veranda with unsanitary toilets. After 23 years of the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, its implementation is still a lacuna.

Demographic Profile

The scavenging community lives in major clusters across the city and out of which five areas were covered during the study which includes; Valeda, Sadar Bazar, Lal Kurti, Guyana Mohalla and Chitra cinema Hall. 58 percent male and 42 percent female were interviewed during the study. Male members are mainly involved in works like cleaning sewers, septic tanks as well as railway tracks whereas the women did the household cleaning. As manual scavenging expose men and women to various health-related problems, they suffer from chest pain, headache, stomachache, nausea.

Table 1: Occupation of the Respondents

Occupation	Frequency	Percent
Going to Households	30	50.0
Cleaning Sewer and Septic tanks	22	36.7
Railway tracks	3	5.0
Septic tanks	5	8.3
Total	60	100

According to table 1, most of the respondents, which were 50 percent, were involved in Household work. During field visits, the researcher themselves witnessed few households with dry toilets which were regularly cleaned by the community members. Apart from the household work, the members of the community were also involved in cleaning sewer and septic tanks, as shown in the above table (1) 37 percent have been regularly cleaning sewer and septic tanks.

As shown below in table (2), it was observed during the study, education is one of the most deprived facilities in this community and a major concern. 57 percent of the total respondents were illiterate (could not read and write). The literacy rate is noted to be below average and not even the third generation alive is in schools due to poverty.

Table 2: Education of the Respondents

		Education of the Respondent						
		Recently Literate	Lower Primary (class I)	Upper Primary (8)	High School (10)	Illiterate	Inter-mediate	Graduate
Sex of Respondent	Female	4	1	0	0	20	0	0
	Male	9	5	4	1	14	1	1
	Total	13	6	4	1	34	1	1

Rawat, et al (2007) revealed in his survey that 76 percent of the total community studied during the survey was illiterate. The respondents who are below 18 years of age (12 percent) are dropouts from the school. In most cases, their parents introduced them to manual scavenging as an inherited occupation. Out of the total 42 percent female respondents, only 6 percent could read and write. Girls are usually not sent to school as they can partner their mothers in the household works. Few women revealed that their mothers or mothers-in-law introduced them to this occupation. There seems to be a slight improvement in the status of the children as compared to their parents, but girls are usually not sent to schools whereas boys tend to lose interest in education over time.

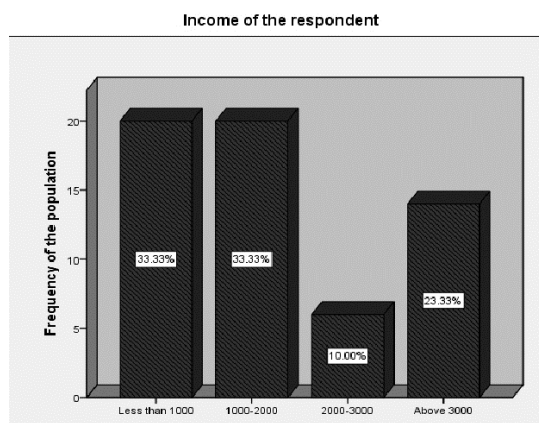


Figure 1: Income of the Respondents

The income of the respondents varied from below 1000 Rs per month to above 3000 Rs per month. According to the figure (1), it can be understood that 33 percent of the respondents were earning less than 1000 Rs per month, whereas 23 percent of the respondents were earning 2000-3000 Rs per month. A study conducted by Jan Sahas Development (2014) showed that 43 percent of the families were earning less than 1000 Rs per month. According to the Rangarajan report (2014), a person spending less than 47 Rs per day in urban areas is considered to fall under below poverty line (BPL). Based on the report it can be assumed that a person earning below 2000 Rs per month falls under the BPL category. It was also noted that 60 percent of the respondents were not availing government health care services. Where health hazards are majorly attached to the occupation of scavenging, many of the respondents were preferring to private healthcare as compared to government.

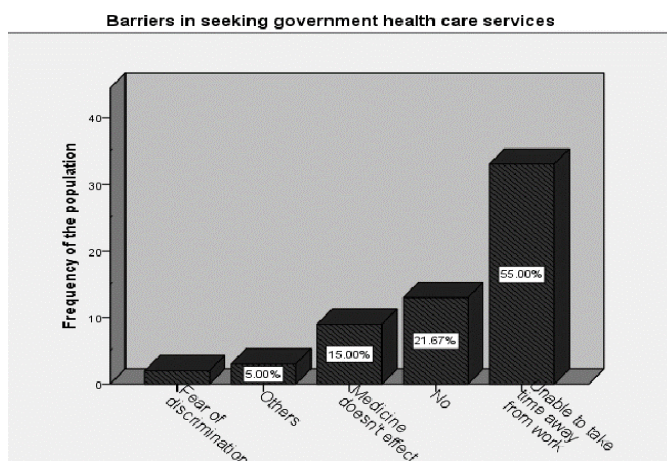


Figure 2: Barriers in Seeking Government Health Care Services

As shown in figure (2), for a majority of respondents the major barriers in seeking government health services were of Unable to take time away from work (55), ineffective medicines (15), fear of discrimination (3). Jan Sahas Development society (2014) in their survey revealed a similar finding of 75 percent of the total respondents never approached government health facility. According to a report by Massachusetts Institute of technology (2006), the primary barriers to seek health care were reported to be too expensive (65), fear of discrimination (12), unable to take time away from work (6). The study indicated towards the non-lucrative outreach patterns of government health care services.

Accessibility and Affordability of Basic Necessities

Education is considered to be one of the primary sources of progress and development for any community or nation. As shown in the below figure (3) that only 15 percent of the respondents were able to afford the schooling of their children. While it is difficult to afford to school of their children for 48 percent of the respondents, in most cases it was observed that the eldest son or daughter drops out of the school at an early age and help their parents economically and end up taking manual scavenging as their occupation.

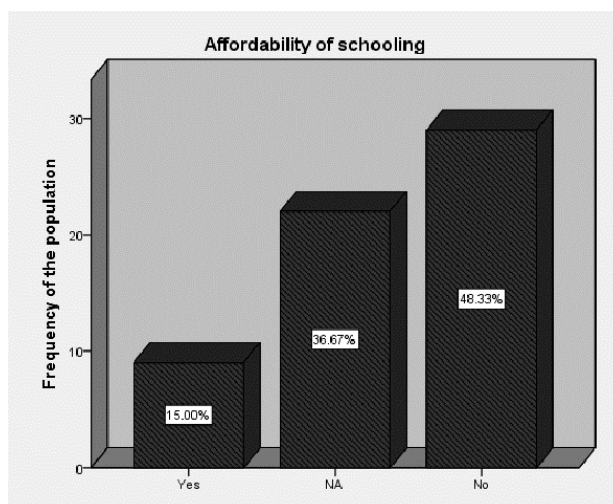


Figure 3: Affordability of Schooling

It was observed that the coming generation is not able to receive a proper education due to less income of parents. The male children usually leave schooling to support their family and the female children left schooling as they were to get married soon. In the era of technology and financial inclusion, it was observed that 52 percent of the respondent doesn't have any bank account.

A lot of debate has been going on in regard to financial inclusion (the process of ensuring access to financial services and timely and adequate credit where needed by vulnerable groups such as weaker sections and low income and low-income groups at an affordable cost). 98 percent of the respondent did not have Below poverty line card and 70 percent did not have ration cards (see below Figure, 4) to access the subsidy on food. In few cases, the ration shop owner was usually absent resulting in the non-accessibility of subsidized grains as per regulations. The socially excluded population is not included in the welfare approach sometimes due to the outreach and at times due to the non-accessibility. Such condition further excludes these marginalized group and their development in terms of sustenance pose a major question.

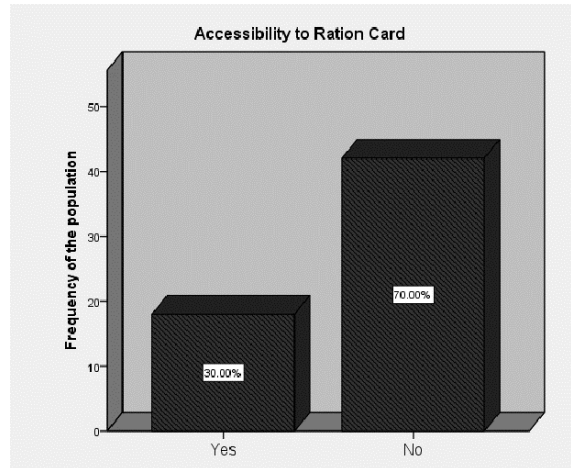


Figure 4: Accessibility to Ration Card

It was also revealed during the interactions and focused group discussions that the respondents haven't received any government position as *safaikaramcharis* as Municipalities and most of the positions are filled by comparatively upper caste candidates. The respondents usually work in municipalities as proxy worker hired by permanent job holders on a meager pay of 75 Rs a day. These unjustified and corruptive practices have laid extensive anger amongst the people towards the state and the corruptive system. Majority of the respondents have lost any hope for any upliftment by the state in their lifetimes, even at times during the study the researcher was also treated with the anguish which usually the community has with the state and the government authorities.

Stigma and Powerlessness

Untouchability and its existence are neither hidden by the state nor its illegality has hidden by one's who are practicing, it is still been carried out consciously or subconsciously by many in their day to day lives. When it comes to the particular community of scavengers the stigma is extremely high due to their occupation of cleaning and picking up human excreta which labels them impure.

There are extreme barriers faced by the people of the community in finding alternative occupation, other than to what has been assigned to them by caste. According to the figure (5), 94 percent of the respondents interviewed in the study don't have any other source of income. They revealed the extreme powerlessness to avoid the demeaning work of scavenging due to the stigma attached to them belonging to a particular community.

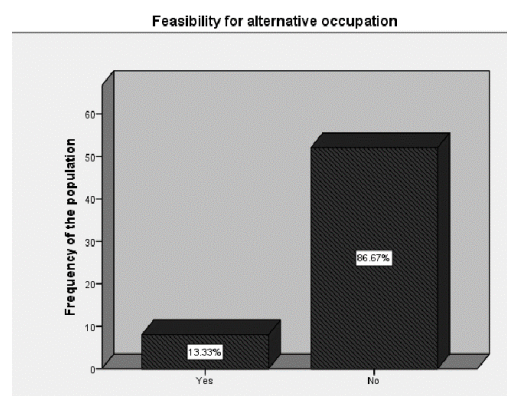


Figure 5: Feasibility for Alternative Occupation

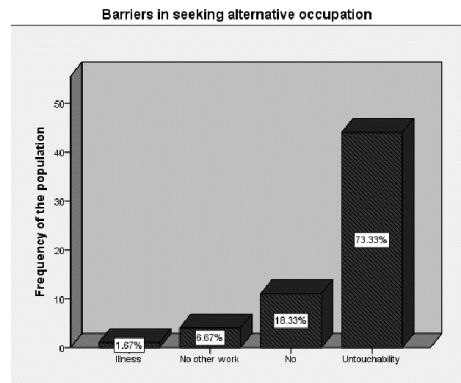


Figure 6: Barriers in Seeking Alternative Occupation

According to the figure (6) 87% revealed the non-feasibility of alternative occupation out of which 74 % labeled untouchability as a barrier to do so. During several occasions the members of the community confessed that it is impossible for them to do any other occupation, they cannot sell fruits and vegetables as no one would buy. It was told that people recognize each other from small towns and would not buy anything they sell, in result, they have to force themselves to do scavenging as the only option to earn the livelihood.

CONCLUSIONS

Dalits have long been marginalized and socially excluded on the basis of the caste system. Manual scavenging is a forced caste-based occupation and an ascribed status acquired by an individual by birth. My introduction with the caste system is still a little vague but its continuous occurrence in my surrounding being a Brahman raised many questions, doubts and also a dual ideology which I found was practiced by my near and dear ones. The sweeper who would come to clean toilets on every Sunday would have his own mug for usual tea purposes. He would have his tea, wash the cup and keep it at its place, which would certainly not be our kitchen. That is the first memory I have followed by many others. The literal meaning of manual scavengers was unknown to me until it was introduced to me by my teacher, who also supervised me during the research. With the help of those discussions I could bring back those forgotten memories of my childhood where I have seen people practicing untouchability, discrimination and attaching stigma. The venture for this particular research started then and I chose my own city (Sitapur, UP) to understand manual scavenging, the stigma, practice of untouchability and the overall socio-economic status of the people who were and are involved in manual scavenging.

The study revealed some shocking points in the context of the existence of manual scavenging which is further to the open defecation practiced and the non-availability of sanitary toilets in many homes. With the help of local aanganwadi workers, I was able to track few households where the unsanitary toilets exist and basically used by women of the household. The vicious cycle of caste discrimination and getting involved in manual scavenging by the children was seen due to the economic condition of the family and the lack of awareness in regard to education. Not a single respondent interviewed had passed matriculation or able to reach till there, therefore the accessibility of reservation for the marginalized group is a far talk when primary education is not accessible to the community. The government benefits or any policies or schemes haven't been able to mobilize the community in a wider context, those who were cleaning the unsanitary toilets are cleaning the sanitary now, their access to alternative occupation beside their ascribed occupation is still a lacuna, therefore there is a caste-based occupation, if many are not cleaning unsanitary toilets, they are still cleaning

sanitary toilets, continuing their inherited occupation based on their caste. Therefore, it is extremely imperative to mobilize the wider community and spread sensitivity. Education should highly be promoted while personality and life skills training to be initiated by the government education system. Singh (2009) notes that to improve the living and working condition of manual scavengers' alternative livelihoods to provided and financial training to be imparted as well besides abolishment of sanitary toilets education should highly be promoted.

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