

Imprisoned for life

Harsh Mander (The Hindu, Jan 9, 2011)

Dalits are often trapped in 'unclean', socially despised occupations because of the persistence of tradition and because there are no viable alternatives...

Millions of women, men and children continue to be trapped in humiliating and socially devalued vocations only because of their birth. The Indian caste system survives in large tracts of rural India despite the sweeping winds of modernity. It mandates the division of labour, or the allocation of occupations, based on one's birth into a particular caste. Caste through millennia permitted little opportunity to people to move from one caste-based occupation to one that is socially regarded to be superior. Many of these barriers persist in modern times.



Winds of change: Demanding the abolition of manual scavenging in law and in practice.
Photo: G. Krishnaswamy

The most disadvantaged castes even among dalits are socially assigned occupations that are considered ritually 'unclean' and socially degrading. Most of these 'unclean' occupations are associated in one way or another with death, human waste or menstruation. These three universal physiological processes have been culturally shrouded by beliefs of intense ritual pollution. The collective tragedy and angst of these most socially oppressed communities is that they find themselves socially trapped into 'unclean' occupations even as the country surges into 21st century, market-led economic growth. Tradition, feudal coercion and economic compulsions combine to persist in ensnaring millions of these dalit families across the length and breadth of the country into socially despised occupations.

Dealing with impurity

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 most states, villagers still expect dalits 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 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 rural locations where public announcements are still 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.

A third category of 'unclean' occupations derives from the culturally polluting character of human waste. In most parts of India, 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.

Deep wounds

Lifelong engagement in these intensely socially despised — and frequently grossly unhygienic — occupations leaves profound physical and psychological scars on people who are forced into this work. Despite technologies available to make the work safe and hygienic, these are rarely deployed.

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 and sweeping. 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 write their reports.

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 footwear 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. 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. In Orissa we find payments of leftover food, old clothes, fistfuls of food grains or petty cash. In most Rajasthan villages, cash is rarely paid for traditional unclean work expected from the dalits, instead they are given food (not more than two rotis). In Karnataka, we found payment of arrack, a meal and some cash for drum-beating, and fixed cash payments for other tasks like mid-wifery and lifting of carcasses. Scavengers may be employed on monthly salary by local bodies, otherwise families pay them cash or stale food.

Not all unclean work is paid, and a lot of it is forced. Refusal to perform 'unclean occupations' often results 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, which brings food into their cooking pot. Scavenging may secure them regular employment in urban local bodies.

Those engaged in unclean occupations are usually assured very low but secure earnings because of their monopoly of these occupations. If they persist in 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, it 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 quandary: 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.

Signs of hope

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. In Tamil Nadu, until recently refusal to perform unclean activities was met with fines, violence or excommunication. However, collective resistance has grown over the past decades, forcing non-dalits to accept the mobility of these dalits into the more respected caste-neutral category of agricultural worker. 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, the Regar community in Sujanpura 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.

A unique national movement of self-respect and non-violent direct action of manual scavengers themselves — the Safai Karmchari Andolan — has succeeded in freeing tens of thousands of mainly women from this practice, although its stubborn last vestiges persist, including in the Indian Railways.

It is these brave and proud struggles of dalit people themselves to free themselves from the shackles of humiliating social tradition, that illuminate our world with hope of a more humane social order for all our children.

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