

Has anybody noticed that some clever and pious coinages in the Hindi officialese do not admit a parallel use of English equivalents, lest their basic spuriousness, their hypocritical intent surface in translation?

The monument of British imperial vanity, where the First Citizen of a democratic republic lives amidst feudal pomp of colonial vintage, bears a patriotic name of Rashtrapati Bhavan.

The shameful legacy of untouchable worker persisting in the 'modern' urban set-up gets accommodated into sanitation services and is given an innocuous label: Safai Karamchari.

Untouchables' Ghetto

Who is a safai karamchari? It is a person employed by a civic body or a government institution, to officially pursue the lowly occupation which the caste system had assigned to his/her forefathers.

To become a regular Safai Karamchari in Delhi one must, first of all, be born into one of the scavenger communities, known in northern India under various names of derogatory character, such as Balmiki being the name they have now largely adopted themselves.

Further, one must work for a few years on daily wages as casual sweeper under the *sarkari* dispensation. It is only much later that one attains the coveted status of a permanent Class IV employee, with attendant benefits of salary increments, paid leave, pension etc.

And at this end of the road to social advancement, a municipal sweeper can at the most graduate to the post of supervisor, to monitor attendance of 20 odd Safai

Karamcharis deployed on their respective beats.

The poison of social exclusion has crippled the ambitions and aspirations of this untouchable human group, uniformly despised and abhorred not only by the high and intermediary castes, but also by other Dalits. Irrespective of their adherence to the Hindu, Neo-Buddhist, Sikh, Muslim or Christian religious fold, the scavengers have throughout

remained isolated, confined to separate ghettos, submerged in the morass of backwardness and illiteracy. Therefore, their main stake in the government reservation policies is the continuing, jealously guarded, hold over menial jobs in sanitation services, railways, government owned or aided schools, hospitals and other establishments.

The ongoing availability of permanent *sarkari* jobs, requiring no technical skills, no education whatever, disbursed solely on the ground of caste reservations, lures Balmiki families with the promise of material security, and at the same time acts as a powerful disincentive against acquiring academic and vocational qualifications by their children. The exclusive monopoly held by the community over the lowest rung of reservation-controlled employment slots is the main factor responsible for the high rate of primary school dropouts, especially among boys. It is boys, never girls, who succeed retiring fathers as Safai Karamcharis. Women enter the scavenging occupation as regular workers only after marriage, and only if there is a financial compulsion to do so.

Delhi's civic bodies at present employ over 50,000 safai karamcharis. Forty-two thousand persons, male and

Modernising Untouchability

The Making of a Multi Crore Sarkari Slum

Anita Soni



A Corporation Sweeper

female, are employed on regular basis (40,000 by MCD and 2,000 by NDMC) and the rest on daily wages. (The particularly hazardous and odious tasks like cleaning of drainage works fall under DWSSDU (Delhi Water Supply Sewage Disposed Undertaking and get executed through contractors, hiring their own labor.)

There are no official schemes aimed at upgradation of skills and equipment involved in sanitation work. Even as the burgeoning megapolis keeps generating mountains of garbage (the 1996 figure was 7,000 tonnes per day!), a rising percentage of which is toxic, hazardous waste, the civic authorities show no intention to reform the anachronic, unscientific and inhuman system of manual collection and removal of solid waste by Safai Karamcharis.

Delhi's top civic officials have of late been travelling in droves to western capitals, purportedly to learn about modern technologies of waste management. The public there is disciplined, unlike ours, they discovered. What about the smart, uniformed sanitary workers atop shining trolleys?

Dehumanizing Work

In Delhi, a Safai Karamchari is a man or woman in ordinary shabby clothing and with a harried look, equipped with just two implements: a tall broom for sweeping the mass of unsegregated garbage (organic and inorganic, rotten refuse along with plastic bags) littered outside houses and commercial establishments; and a wheelbarrow to load all that rubbish on—by hand, with the help of only a piece of cardboard! — and *transport it, heap by heap, to* a stinking, overflowing municipal dustbin, one of 3,000 or so adorning the city.

Little wonder, then, that the notion of 'dignity of labour' is absent

from the mind of even the most diligent Safai Karamcharis and that so many of them regularly abscond from duty to engage themselves in other jobs and businesses, while suitable 'cuts' get adjusted against their salaries to gratify the bosses.

It is common knowledge that the Conservancy and Sanitation Engineering (CSE) Department of MCD, the biggest employer of safai karamcharis in the capital, is second to none as regards the volume and pervasiveness of corruption. Huge amounts of bribes flow to the pockets of sanitary inspectors and higher-ups as reward for noninterference with offences under antipollution laws.

When the lid goes off, as after a breakout of epidemics, court notices, transfers of officials, and revocation of transfer orders under political pressure, follow in quick succession. Ultimately, the blame can always be passed on to the abominable, duty-shirking sweepers who get suspended. That is why MCD wants its Safai Karamcharis to remain as they are : dumb and suppressed, with an indelible stigma of untouchability forever stuck to their occupation.

Multi Crore Scam

It is in this context of institutionalized, officially sanctioned marginalisation of the broom-wielding municipal workers, that the sham and scam of a multi-crore group housing scheme initiated for their 'upliftment' deserves to be known.

Dr. Ambedkar Centenary Avasthaya Yojana for regular Safai Karamcharis of MCD was launched in September, 1993. Applications were invited from Safai Karamcharis fulfilling the requisite conditions (minimum 10 years of regular service) for allotment of residential quarters on Hire-Purchase basis, at an estimated cost of Rs. 93,000 per unit.

A brochure issued by MCD to announce the scheme puts its target at 20,000 dwelling units (that is, half the total number of regular Safai Karamcharis in MCD), to be constructed by MCD with funds from the Government of India. Each unit will be mortgaged in the name of the Corporation pending the recovery of the entire cost from the allottee, the mode of payment being: Rs. 5,000 as registration fee, Rs. 15,000 upon allotment of a flat and the rest in monthly installments with interest @ 12.1/2% per annum, till the due date



A Designer Ghetto, Ambedkar Colony in Rohini

of retirement of the allottee. The cost would be subject to upward revision 'depending upon market prices and change in the interest rate by the government'.

The stated 'Aims and Objectives of the Scheme' exude political correctness :

The centuries old socioeconomic system has forced and degraded one section of the society to the extent that their standard of living had gone to abysmal depth. Because of unhygienic and unhealthy living conditions, the quality of their life has also deteriorated. The problem of housing accommodation for Safai Karamcharis employed in local bodies like MCD is acute.....Because of their socio-economic status, they perform have to live in undeveloped slum areas by taking *jhuggies* on rent.... This scheme, therefore, envisages upliftment of Safai Karamcharis employed in MCD and enables them to own houses while in service.'

Having thus declared its profound humanitarian concern for the unfortunate Safai Karamcharis (whose 'socio-economic status' could be expected to have improved during ten years or more of regular service, with salaries higher than those of semi-skilled industrial workers in the public sector, were it not for the oppressive working conditions courtesy MCD!), the Corporation proceeded to construct houses to be procured by the allottees.

The first set of 640 'Bhopal type residential dwelling units' (as the above quoted MCD brochure quaintly describes them, may be with reference to Bhopal Gas Disaster Rehabilitation Scheme) came up on a sprawling site at Rohini Sector 20, in the vicinity of Pooth Kalan village, at a distance of 3 km from Sultanpuri. The just-completed housing complex



Houses without Water, Sanitation or Electricity

was formally inaugurated by Shri Madan Lal Khurana, the then Chief Minister of Delhi, on the auspicious date of Dr. Ambedkar's birthday, the 14th of April, 1994. Shri Jeet Ram Solanki, the local MLA, presided over the function which was attended by top MCD officials: the Commissioner, the Director of CSE Department, and a whole hierarchy of engineers credited with authorship and execution of the project. A commemorative tablet installed at the site has their names and designations inscribed in black marble. Alas, all of them, starting from the Commissioner, have by now moved on to other posts.

A Designer Ghetto

None of the present residents remember having attended the inauguration ceremony. Apparently, the allottees, some 500 in number at that time, had not even been informed about the self-congratulatory occasion that *Sahib log* were to celebrate. An adhoc collected crowd of hangers on substituted for cheering beneficiaries.

Anyhow, the housing complex, presently known as 'Dr. B.R. Ambedkar MCD Colony, Rohini Sector 20 stands in the midst of a vast

empty plain as a large cluster of uniform double-storey buildings, coated with uniform yellow plaster, now uniformly graying and peeling off. It is recognizable from a distance, and cannot be mistaken for anything else than what it actually is: a designer ghetto.

The complex is divided into 32 blocks, or compounds, each consisting of 20 dwelling units arranged around a paved hexagonal courtyard, twelve units on the ground floor and eight on the upper floor. Each unit covers an area of 30 sq. meters and comprises one main room, a kitchen, a bathroom, a latrine and an open-air verandah which can be converted by the user into a second room. A ground floor unit has two entrances, one from the common courtyard and another from the verandah on the outer side of the compound. An upper floor unit can only be accessed through an open stairway, leading from the common courtyard to a pair of flats, their adjoining verandahs separated only by a half-meter high partition. Not much privacy here.

The whole architectural design is neat, orderly, logical, clever in its use of space—and profoundly

depressing. The same geometrical pattern of a double-storeyed, twenty-unit compound with a common courtyard has been replicated 32 times—and left at that.

Basic Needs Overlooked

What has been delivered, is a series of 640 'dwelling units' thought of as separate marketable commodities, not as parts of an organic, integrated settlement. The built-over site was meant to become home to 640 families, that is, some three thousand human beings, ranging from infants and toddlers to school-going children and youngsters, to married young adults to middle-aged and elderly people, each age group having different requirements to be met and shared in community spaces outside the family premises and compound courtyards.

The colony has none of it. There are no public spaces belonging to everybody, no places where people could easily congregate, hold councils, celebrate festivals, organize cultural events, play outdoor games.

There are only rows of identical compounds, their courtyards drab and empty (except where the residents themselves dared to rip apart concrete slabs and plant some trees). The arched gates of compounds open into broad streets, similarly drab and stark, without a single patch of greenery.

People's need for a healthy and friendly environment, for a sense of belonging and participation, the need for leisure, education, religion, culture, has been callously over-looked.

No attempt has been made to establish a rapport of the housing complex with the neighboring area. There is plenty of open vacant space around the MCD colony, but that is a forbidden zone—government land—upon which only outsiders with political connections can, and do,



encroach. Building a temple on such land is a well-known ploy, and the opportunity for it has already been seized by a cheeky intruder claiming patronage of both the Congress Party and the Shiv Sena.

There is a large plot encircled with a barbed wire fence right within the precincts of the MCD colony. It could become a park, or a site for Community Building—but it is kept strictly out of bounds for the residents, except that one corner is being used for dumping garbage, and freely roaming pigs find their way in-side.

The total absence of social welfare infrastructure at the colony stands in shocking contrast to the established practice of anticipating and creating such infrastructure as an integral part of all housing projects commissioned by the government for accommodating the weaker sections! In this case, the allottees have been directly targeted by MCD as its bonafide employees whose 'quality of life' needs to be improved. So, the standard community facilities such as primary school, anganwadi, health centre or municipal dispensary, community hall, religious sites, parks for adults and children, market place including PDS shops and milk booths, should

all have been there at the time of the official inauguration of the complex.

The nearest place where some educational and medical facilities have been provided by MCD is Pooth Kalan -a Jat-dominated village with an undiluted casteist ethos. Parents and school children coming from the 'Bhangi colony' are instantly recognized as such, and treated accordingly.

Still, the Safai Karamcharis and their families must at least enjoy the comfort of their 'standard dwelling units'?

No Water, No Sewerage, No Electricity

Not quite. Three years after the handing over of the complex, its occupancy is hardly one-third of the total number of houses. The original allottees and their blood relations presently residing in the colony account for no more than 140 house-holds. Why?

Lack of basic amenities is the commonly given reason. Some allottees have left only recently, ready to come back when things improve, some left soon after taking possession of their flats, keeping them vacant, some have rented out theirs, some have traded them off (illegally of course, through

ubiquitous property brokers) to well-heeled and well-connected buyers from outside the Balmiki community. Such new owners have had no difficulty in converting the drab, shabbily constructed dwelling into imposing houses (always extended beyond the original space limits), with all the essential comforts that MCD has been persistently denying to the colony as a whole.

The failure of MCD in all these years to provide basic amenities—drinking water, electricity, sewerage, sanitation—to the original target group of its housing scheme has certainly been deliberate. There can be no other explanation for it except that construction of houses for Safai Karamcharis in the wake of Dr. Ambedkar centenary celebrations was a circumstantial gesture made in bad faith, and that they had not been expected to occupy these houses for long. The Corporation could not care less if the housing project, funded generously by the Central Government in the name of social welfare, would ultimately fall prey to the market forces.

For the time being over two hundred Balmiki families (allottees and tenants) still brave it out against all odds.

They have been forced to become power thieves, because individual electricity connections have not been provided to them (neither has been street lighting), although every dwelling unit is fitted with electric wiring and separate meter. DESU inspectors are well aware of the theft, in fact, they condone it by collecting monthly 'dues' from each household, according to the number of appliances used (ceiling fans, air coolers, TV sets etc.). Anyway, the total consumption of electric power by

the colony is negligible in comparison to that of Pooth Kalan village, with its multitude of illegal factories.

Dumped in Filth

The water pipes and taps in kitchens, bathrooms and toilets are mere decorations. Municipal water supply has never materialized, and MCD has never even considered sending water tankers. A single water post, illegally created at the end of one street by laying a connection pipe from the main leading to the nearby (yet unoccupied) DDA flats, serves as the only source of drinking water for all resident families. During the one-hour supply time (5 p.m. to 6 p.m.), all women get busy queuing at the tap, filling their pitchers and buckets and carrying them to their homes across the length and width of the colony. A few handpumps, installed at the residents' own

expense, yield non-potable water used for the bathing and washing purposes.

Latrines and drains provided within dwelling units have remained unusable, as the drainage system of the colony has not been connected to a main sewer line. The residents go out in the morning to the 'jungle', as they call the shrub area on the outskirts of Pooth Kalan village, to answer the call of nature. Children ease themselves squatting along the permanently choked street gutter. Sanitation services are nonexistent. There has not been a single garbage removal operation by MCD in the more than three years of the colony's existence. It does not help much that the residents take good care to sweep clean their common courtyards and gateways every morning and evening. Uncleared garbage dumps have accumulated in by-lanes and on the periphery of dwelling compounds.

To make things worse, the approach road from Sultanpuri through a low-lying shrubland gets permanently inundated with sewage water and toxic industrial effluents of Pooth Kalan, rendering the passage difficult for women and children.

If, in spite of such unhealthy environment, the menace of gastroenteritis and other waterborne diseases has not assumed epidemic proportions, it is only because the Balmikis—contrary to the prevailing opinion—are very particular about their household hygiene. Their kitchens are always kept meticulously clean and water and food carefully protected from contamination.

Protests and Apathy

Three years is a long time. Why did not these people raise a hue and cry, take MCD to task,



A garbage dump in the colony's midst

stage protest dharnas, go to the press, go to court?

The reasons for their lack of militancy are many and varied, but all related in one way or another to the continuous experience of social exclusion.

There is unwillingness to enter into open dispute with MCD as that could invite a retaliatory action. The Corporation not only owns the houses allotted to them ('in case of disputes the decision of the Commissioner of MCD will be final and binding,' they have been warned at the outset); it also controls their jobs.

There is ignorance of legal rights and remedies available to them, and mistrust of the official machinery, including the courts of justice.

There is constant awareness of prejudice and hostility harbored by the society at large against the Safai Karamcharis, considered even by the educated middle class to be a band of lazy parasites pampered by the government (the *sarkari damaad* syndrome).

There is generally poor collective self-image, resulting in lack of mutual trust and solidarity, to the extent of deliberate avoidance of social interaction among unrelated individuals and families within the community. This has resulted in each family closing upon itself; aloofness cultivated as mark of *personal* respectability.

Women in particular are reluctant to come together. While the housewives remain confined to their family premises and rarely venture out of their compounds, those in gainful employment as Safai Karamcharis or as domestic servants in middle-class localities, come back tired from their far-way work places only to get down to household chores.

To be fair, there have been genuine efforts by a small group of concerned residents (all men) to get for the colony its due share of civic amenities. Towards this goal, they even formed a Vikas Samiti, later properly constituted and registered as 'Dr. B.R. Ambedkar MCD Colony Residents' Welfare Association', in a conscious attempt to claim middle-class respectability.

But the tactics employed have been of the non-militant kind, preferred by slum dwellers: representations, deputations, supplications to officials and local politicians. Nothing that MCD, with its expertise in non-accountability to the public needed to worry about.

The plight of a couple of hundred Balmiki families living in their officially provided flats without basic amenities could hardly be considered a serious matter. Especially as the colony never got a chance to acquire political status. It does not count as a vote bank, it does not as much as figure in the electoral lists of Rohini Zone. All voter's Identity Cards in possession of its bonafide inhabitants bear old addresses, and those who cared to cast their votes in the recent civic polls, could only do so at their

previous places of residence.

It was only recently that facts of perfidious, covert discrimination against these powerless people dumped at the far end of western Delhi were brought to the knowledge of two voluntary agencies working for empowerment of Dalits: the Joint Women's Program (JWP), a well-known women's rights advocacy group with an all-India reach, and the Delhi-based Society of Depressed People for Social Justice, headed by a public-spirited lawyer of the Central Administrative Tribunal.

Both organisations saw the issue of substandard group housing for Safai Karamcharis as one of casteist prejudice, and decided to jointly take up cudgels for the aggrieved victims.

They filed a PIL case against MCD on the ground that supply of 'bare and essential' civic service and amenities water, electricity, drainage and sanitation, constituted a statutory obligation of MCD, and the nonperformance of these obligatory duties towards allottees of its very own housing scheme was in contravention of the MCD Act, 1957. But, given the low visibility of the case, and the prevailing social bias of the judiciary in the present political climate, the writ petition



filed in Delhi High Court in May 1997 did not have much chance of being admitted and, after a hostile, prejudiced hearing, had to be withdrawn.

MCD must not be allowed to carry on with its 'Ambedkar Centenary Avas Yojana in this manner. Construction of new 'Bhopal type residential dwelling units' is in progress elsewhere in Delhi (at EE Block of Jahangirpuri, for instance). Inured though we all have become to scams surfacing every other day, it is still worth an investigative journalist's trouble to find out how much money has already been received by MCD from the Government of India for implementation of the scheme, who sanctioned it, and how it has fattened MCD officials and building contractors. Connivance of MCD babudom in the illegal sale of allotted flats must also be probed.

As for education and social care inputs, badly needed in the existing Safai Karamchari colony at Rohini, they may ideally be provided by independent social agencies. And not on charity basis : the residents will gladly pay for good professional services, moderately priced, at their doorsteps.

Made Worse Off

The colony represents a cross-section of the Balmiki populace in Delhi. The families are both from urban and rural (Haryana, Rajasthan, U.P.) background, the former often quite well-off, the latter barely pulling through, but none are destitute.

They were *not* living in subhuman conditions, in hovels,



before coming here; while some were technically *jhuggi* dwellers, others lived in, or even owned, *pucca* houses in unauthorized colonies. They had access to municipal facilities like schools, *anganwadis*, dispensaries etc.

They have opted for residence in a 'regular' colony mainly in hope of improving their social status and providing their children with a better, cleaner environment. That hope has been belied.

This transpired clearly in the course of a door-to-door survey which two networking organisations recently conducted. Asked what they lacked most sorely in the colony, an overwhelming majority of respondents complained about the absence of a 'good' school, a health

centre with inoculation facilities and a gynecologist, an *anganwadi*, and a training centre in tailoring for girls.

Not the daily trouble with *bijli-paani*, which they hoped would be solved in time to come, but the social deprivation in terms of nonexisting family welfare services and educational opportunities for the young has been their main concern.

Earning for Schools

Very few families in the colony have been lucky to get their wards admitted in good government-run or government-aided schools in the city before shifting to Rohini. Such rare luck compensates in their eyes the distance over which the children have to commute now. Private educational institutions in the surrounding area (including the Bal Vidya Mandir Model School next door to the

colony) do not admit Balmiki children in the special SC/ST category, and charge very high fees in the general category. Even then many parents prefer to send their sons and daughters from an early age (three plus) to those 'English medium' schools because of their middle-class ambience and discipline.

The MCD school in the nearby Pooth Kalan village has on its rolls the greatest number of Balmiki students from the colony, but also a record rate of dropouts at primary level. Even illiterate parents despair that children waste their time there. Classes are seldom held; teachers come only to take attendance.

More adolescent boys than girls are found among the primary school dropouts, who never attained even

functional literacy. Healthy, grown lads spend their time lazying around, watching TV, sitting it out till their parents get them into the only 'career' they are capable of.

Balmiki girls are often bright students, and their parents take great interest and pride in their education. Quite a few families have, on shifting residence to Rohini, left their young daughters behind under the care of relatives, so that their studies may not be disrupted.

What is most heartening is the perceptible generational shift in attitudes towards education as means of social mobility. While old parents of idle, illiterate sons would gladly have them employed as MCD sweepers 'if only they had this kind of money' (meaning money for the bribe, or *pagree*), the younger generation of Safai Karamcharis show firm resolve to save their progeny from the indignity of taking up a scavenging job.

Scope for Action

Here, then, is a tremendous scope for affirmative action of a kind that the officialdom is incapable of: adopting this neglected colony, endowing it with a range of excellent, professionally run services which would also be open to, and benefit, 'outsiders' from the neighboring area, so that the present isolation of the Balmiki colony is replaced by mutual acceptance and good-will.

A model school up to VIII standard, with nursery and KG sections and special tuition classes for

illiterate children, could come up on a site allotted by the government, with contributions in cash and labour from the residents. (Initially, classes could be held in tents; it is the quality of teachers that would matter.) A variety of training centres for girls, young housewives and unemployed youth; a public library; a cooperative store; a sports clubs; a well-equipped clinic with a pair of doctors, a nurse and a link with an established hospital for referral and emergency cases— all these would go a long way in transforming the languishing ghetto into an integrated settlement where people would live 'in dignity, good health, safety, happiness and hope'.

Such experiment would create a functional model of human solidarity towards the goal of social integration. It would provide a point of reference for an honest public debate on the urgent need for emancipation of the Balmiki as a community from the humiliating dependence on reservation-based employment in scavenging.

The assorted labour unions of Safai Karamcharis can do nothing in this direction, manipulated as they are by political parties which have vested interest in keeping their

captive constituencies of Class IV employees.

The much talked about transfer of sanitation services to the private sector will mean that, while the higher ranks of officials may be spared the axe and receive increased benefits, private contractors will be invited to deal with execution of work at the ground level. They will be given free rein to hire and fire their labour, drawing from the large reserve of unemployed work-force. They will be under no obligation to pay decent wages and provide permanency benefits. The system of manual scavenging will remain unchanged, minus the social security net.

The threat of such development taking place may be countered if the presently employed Safai Karamcharis are helped to organize themselves in sanitary workers' co-operative, acquire mechanized equipment and negotiate their pay conditions directly with residents' associations in different urban areas. The already commenced process of turning away from the hereditary occupation will be accelerated by the withdrawal of government patronage, and the occupation, technically upgraded, will gradually cease to be caste-specific.

But mere technological change under the impact of market forces will not lead to social integration of today's untouchables which is an issue that should involve us all. □

*Photographs
for this
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