

The 'Unclean' Who Keep The City Clean

“We live with the same stench with which we started”

Scavengers and sweepers are at the very bottom of the Hindu frame of reference. Divided into a number of sub-castes, their traditional work consisted of removing human excreta and refuse, often carried in baskets on their heads, and sweeping village roads. The basic nature of this job has not changed, even in cities. Only men and women of these castes keep the sanitation system going.

Studies conducted over a period of 25 years show that the position of the female sweeper has changed little. Within the occupation, women tend to do the more defiling, arduous and less-paid tasks. A 1952 study in Madhya Pradesh found that twice as many women as men were sweeping roads; men got promoted to supervisory posts, became watchmen, or were trained to drive refuse trucks, while women remained scavengers. Male bhangis in Bhiwani and Mathura are increasingly becoming labourers, rickshaw-pullers and tonga drivers. Most men were in Government employment while women remained in private scavenging jobs. In post-Green Revolution Haryana too, more than a third of Balmiki men had left the profession for better-paid, higher status jobs, while the two women who had left had only become agricultural labourers.

This report is based on a small survey in a West Delhi tenement colony among 80 Balmiki women. Balmikis are a sub-caste of the scavenging bhangi caste in North India. The aim was to study male-female patterns of mobility and authority structures.

Job Choice and Job Mobility

In occupations which are restricted to one particular caste, women always participate in the work system, and therefore there is a greater degree of equality in the sex migration ratio, that is, men of this caste who migrate to the city from villages are more likely to bring their wives with them.

How much choice do these women have as regards work? Bimla, a 26-year old woman earning Rs. 75 from 15 houses, says: “In our community, there is no choice for a woman with



regard to working, we don't ask questions; at the age of ten, we are handed a broom.” Although the majority of women feel the need to work, they say that someone else – mother, husband or mother-in-law, had initially decided that they should work. An unemployed woman is considered a burden.

Though the Delhi Municipal Corporation reserves 75 per cent of scavenging jobs for men and 25 per cent for women, the ratio is almost 50:50 in favour of women. A senior official commented that though male Balmikis still dominate the profession, with more men moving into jobs in shops, factories and commercial establishments, the Corporation has to engage women in excess of the reserved quota. That is, women continue to do the low-paid, low status job of sweeping, while men move upwards into better jobs. Women have no job opportunities open to them at all, and no training facilities.

Five Paise A Day

Those women working for the Municipal Corporation, doing road-sweeping or in hospitals and schools, get a better salary than those working in private homes. They also get three months maternity leave, uniforms and have job security. But of the women interviewed, more than half work in private houses.

Private sweepers work under barbaric conditions. Wage

rates differ arbitrarily from area to area in the city. The majority of those interviewed earn less than Rs 100 a month. In some areas, they get Rs. 50 for working in 30 houses that is, Rs. 1.66 a month per house, or five paise a day for cleaning a latrine and throwing away garbage. The degree of exploitation is evident where a minimum busfare costs 30 paise and a cup of tea 25.

The work is very tiring. It involves climbing flights of stairs, carrying garbage on the head for long distances, and working in a bent posture for hours together. Maternity leave is unknown. Most women continue to work almost to the day of childbirth, and they have to provide substitutes for the days they are absent. Their salaries for these days go to the substitutes.

They Call me Jamadarni

Though untouchability is a legal offence, the women experience it every day of their lives. They are not allowed to enter other rooms in their employers' houses. In many houses, they are not even supposed to touch the tap or bucket in the bathroom, because these would get defiled by their touch. Bimla says : "Most of my employers address me as jamadarni (sweeperess). There is no personal relationship with them. I clean the latrine, throw away garbage, sweep the stairs and

driveways. I am not supposed to sweep the other rooms, though sometimes when the servant is absent, I am asked to stand in. I get very tired, carrying dustbins and bending over the stairs fifteen times a day."

The older women are more resigned to facing such humiliation but some of the younger ones seethe with indignation, like Kamla, who has been working since the age of 11, and is now a mother of four : "Who says there is no untouchability? Even after all these years, I am not allowed to go anywhere near the kitchen. I work for Baniyas who are very fussy. There is one relative of theirs – she says she is a school teacher – she lifts up her sari if she has to pass me. When she does that, I feel like throwing acid on her face. Don't we have hearts and bodies just like you? I'm sure you shudder to clean your baby's behind. What about us, for generations steeped in excreta and muck and carrying dung on our heads? It was only a man called Mahatma Gandhi who tried to change things for us; nobody else has done anything ever since. We live with the same stench with which we started."

Single-Handed Drudgery

The average number of children is five. Men rarely help in housework or childcare. Occasionally, they may do the shopping or take a sick child to the dispensary. If sons help at



all, it is only till the age of about ten years. Adolescent boys spent their free time playing, while their sisters mind younger children or help with housework. The women laugh when asked if they get any free time. Outings to the cinema are unknown. The most common form of relaxation seems to be chatting at the doorstep while preparing the evening meal.

Who Takes the Decisions ?

Though Balmiki women earn money, they have no economic independence, nor has the traditional structure of male-female relationships in the family been altered. None of the women interviewed have the right to spend any part of their salary on themselves – it all goes into household expenses, while husbands invariably keep back some money for drinking, smoking, cinema-going and getting themselves new clothes. Drunkenness and wife-beating are very common. Even working wives get beaten up by unemployed husbands.

Bimla, who sells vegetables on the roadside every evening, says : “My husband thinks one can do business with a sour look on one’s face. Just because I smile at the customers, he thinks I am behaving badly. Some months ago, my saree had accidentally slipped off my shoulder while one of the regular customers was buying vegetables. Hari saw me talking to this chaprasi. Since then, he is convinced that I am having an affair with him. Though my neighbours have tried to explain to him that this is not the case, he gets drunk and beats me up regularly.”

Bimla also suspects her husband of having an affair with his widowed sister-in-law whom he frequently visits in the village : “He even brought her to my home last month. I lost my temper and slapped her face. Hari was enraged and hit me with a big stone. See, you can see the scar on my face.”

Men take all the major financial decisions such as buying a bicycle or radio, visiting the village, where the women should work, how long a visit she should pay to her parents. Women only take day-to-day decisions such as when to buy rations or fuel, because husbands are unwilling to do the difficult job of running the house on a shoe-string budget. Even so, most of the women have to give accounts to their husbands.

Rajwati says : “My husband takes all the major decisions about how we should spend our money. Though I earn as much as he does, I do not expect to boss over him in financial matters. At one time, he was briefly out of a job. Even then, he was all in all. After all, he is my lord and master.”

In Delhi, every sweeper has a fixed beat – a number of private houses. This beat may be ‘sold’ to another, but no employer can dismiss a sweeper and hope to get another. When a beat is to be sold, it is the males who do the bargaining, even if a woman is to do the work. When one woman is selling to another woman, they may do the talking themselves, but even

then, men do interfere. Widowed women usually do their own talking.

Daughters – Will Things Be Better ?

Only three women knew that there are Government scholarships and reserved seats for their children in school! Though most of those whose sons are in school want them to complete schooling, they have to face two harsh facts – a son in school means more expense and deprives the family of what he can earn; the boys are discriminated against in school.

One evening, I was talking to Mayawati, a Corporation sweeper, as she smoked a bidi after the day’s work. When we came to the question of education, her male co-worker Natho who had been listening silently, interrupted to say that in education lay the path to salvation. Mayawati looked hard at him, took her bidi out of her mouth and hawked noisily into the nearby drain. She asked Natho, “What has your class X pass son got even five years after leaving school? Of what use is school to our children ?... Today, they want books, tomorrow pencils, even though it is all supposed to be free in government schools. The other day, I happened to pass by the boys’ school. I saw my ten-year-old son playing marbles in the dust, so I shouted, ‘Ohe, Ramu, is it your free period ?’ He shook his head – no. A teacher was standing nearby and I heard her telling another one, ‘Oh, these dirty bhangis, they expect us to teach their children.’ I walked on, silently. When Ramu came home, I asked him what he did at school. He said, ‘This and that, sometimes we study when Bahenji feels like it.’ So that’s what school means for our children.” Natho then asked why she sent her children to school. Mayawati shrugged her shoulders, “If they leave school, they will be on the streets.”

All the women’s daughters had dropped out of school after the first few classes. Some had got married before the age of 15 and nearly all had started helping their mothers with sweeping work in early adolescence. Phoolwati, mother of three girls, says: “Why should I waste time and money sending her to school where she will learn nothing? What will she do with the Hindi alphabet? *Will it help her to get any other kind of job?*... She will get married soon and her mother-in law will send her to clean latrines somewhere. If she goes to school, she will get big ideas and then be beaten up by her husband or abused by her mother-in-law.”

The mothers do not feel they are being unfair as job opportunities for their daughters are nonexistent. The only use they can see in education is that after marriage, a girl will be able to write to her parents how she is being treated by her in-laws.

Modernizing Economy – Women Pushed Backwards

Dalits – men and women – rank at the bottom of the caste hierarchy. Even within this oppressed group, the women are the most oppressed. In a modernizing economy, as Ester Boserup has pointed out in her book *The Role of Women in*

Left: Division of labour between the sexes? Both these photographs were taken at 11 a.m. in the colony. (Photographs by Sandeep Shankar)

Economic Development, women get pushed out of traditional occupations like weaving, spinning and handicrafts, by the new industries. They lose not just income but also status in the market and at home.

However, in caste-bound occupations like scavenging, the immediate problem is not women being thrown out of employment, but their remaining in the worst paid, most despised occupations, while the men move upwards. The men get some access to technology and training facilities while the women do not.

Many more Balmiki boys than girls go to school and college. In the present survey, all those who had sons had sent them to school. 15 boys had dropped out of school. Seven of these had got jobs as sweepers, mechanics, drivers. Two sons had finished school and two were in college. All except one of the remaining 56 women wanted their sons to finish school. However, not one of the girls had gone beyond the first few classes in school. There is wide and growing gap between the education of boys and girls. Desai and Pillai's study in 1972 found that illiteracy was three times more among slum women than among men.

With no access to education or to training facilities, Balmiki women are forced to continue cleaning latrines. The only ambition of the women interviewed was to get a job as a Corporation sweeper rather than work in private houses. Beyond that, there are no job opportunities for them. Many are not even allowed to clean rooms in their employers' houses because of their 'low' caste.

On the other hand, the men's aspirations are growing. They are moving from Corporation jobs into other jobs as drivers, mechanics, factory workers. They think it beneath their dignity to work in private houses. As Bimla put it: "I worked till the day my last two children were born. I nearly lost my job, because my husband who used to act as my substitute was very erratic. This was mainly because he thought it demeaning to clean

latrines."

The 1961 Census shows that among Delhi Balmiki women, there was only one woman to every 300 men in trade, commerce or manufacturing.

Balmiki men violently resist any attempt by the women to get out of the scavenging profession, because it is useful for them to have wives in jobs which need no expenditure or training. It is also very advantageous – usually a man lives on his wife's income while he is undergoing training or is unemployed and looking for a better job than a sweeper's.

The gap grows between men and women in the family. The women are weighed down by the double load of domestic work, childcare, and the backbreaking sweeping jobs. The men gain access to a wider world and become more contemptuous and aggressive towards the women. Two of the women interviewed who are wives of clerks, were full of shame – they felt it was humiliating for their husbands to have wives in a 'low' occupation, like scavenging.

The men have full control over the wives income and expenditure, even over whether they should work or not. Some take their wives out of employment to show their 'higher status'.

It is difficult to be anything but pessimistic about the future of the poor woman in India's cities. Employment rarely improves the position of an Indian working woman in her family. She just becomes an additional earner as well as an unpaid domestic worker. By keeping the hearth going, she helps her husband to move ahead. 'Modernization' is helped by women continuing in low-status and strenuous jobs, and releasing men for the new technology. But this modernization does not help women's status. Nor does it make their husband's attitudes towards them more 'modern'. The chances of a man in the city being able to lead a better life are far greater than the chances of a woman in a similar position.

- Malvika Karlekar