COMMUNITIES ENGAGED IN MANUAL SCAVENGING:
PROBLEMS, DYNAMICS & WAY FORWARD
NATIONAL CONFERENCE
Organized by
Center for Study of Social Exclusion & Inclusive Policies
TATA INSTITUTE OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
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Concept Note

Dalits engaged in manual scavenging constitute more than a million peoples in India. The occupation has always been caste/descent-based and is performed predominantly by members of Dalit communities. Despite several measures including an Act in 1993 declaring it as an offence, the government of India in general and the different states in particular have miserably failed to eradicate the inhuman practice of cleaning toilets and lifting human excreta by hand, euphemistically referred to as ‘manual scavenging’. In fact, governments in the past had constantly denied its existence, several studies and reports of civil society organizations and institutions have come to the conclusion several times that the governments, central and states, have been the largest employers of manual scavengers and thus are the biggest perpetrators of this crime and violators of human rights of these voiceless citizens of the country.

The irony, however, is that the government has set deadlines for about 15 times and has never been able to meet them. March 31, 2012 was the last such deadline for complete eradication of manual scavenging, but comprehensive data compiled by the 2011 Census on the type of latrine facility within households reveals there are over 7.4 lakh households across the country where ‘night soil is removed by humans’. This does not include the households where ‘night soil is disposed into open drain’ (over 12.33 lakh households) and ‘night soil is serviced by animals’ (over 4.93 lakh) that are most likely to engage manual scavenging services subsequently. About 25 lakh households are still using dry (non-flush) latrines, employing manual scavengers directly or indirectly (Indian Express, April 4, 2013). Chandigarh, Sikkim, Goa and Lakshwadeep are the only regions in the country that do not have a single instance of manual scavenging.

The government has recently conceded that the existing law ‘Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrine (Prohibition) Act 1993’ has failed to address the issue. It, therefore, introduced a new legislation viz., ‘The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Bill 2012’ in the Lok Sabha on September 3, 2012. It is believed that the Bill will address various issues including numerous forms of manual scavenging prevalent in the country and comprehensive rehabilitation of scavengers in dignified and sustainable livelihood.

As we all know the scavenger community is not homogeneous. They are known by different names in different regions and states and belong to different religious groups such as Christians, Sikhs, Hindus and Muslims. Despite being engaged in the same occupation and facing similar discrimination, their struggle against processes of marginalization, it seems, is at the level of the individual self and thereby not cohesive.

It is the pro-active role played by activists, representatives of various NGOs and academic institutions that the issue of manual scavenging received tremendous visibility and has been in the news very frequently. It is the result of these efforts that government appears more serious about addressing this issue. Although NGOs have been working with this community for the last thirty years and the government has, on paper, put in place means of abolishing this occupation, yet the situation remains the same. Part of the answer lies in other critical processes. These include fragmented communities, fragmented leadership within the community, their under-representation in the social sector and other social groups who have hijacked the issue coupled with alienation of their issues by political parties that claim to champion the cause of Dalits.
The community has a few activists who are working passionately for the development of the community. However, due to financial constraints, lack of education and social exclusion (even by the larger Dalit movement) they do not receive any media attention; neither are they supported by funding agencies. Many activists from the community have left this field due to the lack of support. In spite of these obstacles some continue to work - they are currently working in isolation in different parts of the country. These communities need to be integrated. Activists from different scavenger communities who belong to different religions but face the same caste based discrimination need a platform where they can come together and collectively plan for more effective strategies and develop their leadership.

Current debates with regards to scavenger's community include – Is this one community or many communities, state response and commitment towards abolishing this practice, investment in technology that will allow the abolishing of this occupation, alternate sources of livelihood for those currently engaged in the occupation and investment in education of the community. Last but not least is the issue pertaining to community's conception of self-respect and dignity or secured livelihood that is rooted into defiling and dehumanizing occupation.

It is in this backdrop, the Centre for Study of Social Exclusion and Inclusive Policies, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai plan to host a Two-day National Conference on "Scavenger Communities: Problem, Dynamics & Way Forward", sponsored by ICSSR. The Conference will be held on September 16-17, 2013 in Conference Hall, TISS (main campus) Mumbai. The conference is an attempt to bring together about 50 leader activists, academics, research scholars, writers, advocates, journalists and a few liberated manual scavengers from around 12 states and involves discussions on - sharing of work, challenges faced, achievements and experiences with different NGOs and social groups. Through this, efforts are being made to find out what problems they face individually and if possible, strategize to seek solutions collectively. The Conference would provide platform to strengthen a movement against practice of manual scavenging imposed on millions of Dalits throughout the country. A two day engagement in the conference will be on the themes mentioned below.

**Themes of the conference**

1. Unraveling caste dimensions within the scavenger communities.
2. Theorizing Leadership through the experience of activist leaders from scavenger communities and

**Objectives of the Conference**

1. To understand the status of manual scavenging in India.
2. To understand the relationship between the scavenger communities and Dalits.
3. To create a national alliance of social activists from scavenger communities.
4. To bring together research scholars, writers, advocates, journalists and activists to deliberate on the scavenger communities.
5. To discuss the status of women among scavenger community.
6. To discuss the status of education among the scavenger community in India and
7. To discuss dignified employment options for scavengers.

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