

Manual scavenging: a history of denial

MultiCity

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Last week, the state government commissioned a count of people in Mumbai who work as manual scavengers – a term used to describe workers who remove wastes from toilets that are not connected to a sewer system. Three committees, members of which include representatives of castes which traditionally did the work, have been formed in Mumbai and the suburbs to assist the survey

There is no exact count of the people who do this job. Many state governments have denied that the dehumanising practice exists in their areas. In Mumbai, the last census estimates their numbers to be around 42,000 – most of them employed by the municipal corporation, railways and housing societies to keep their premises and toilets clean.

The practice of manual removal of human waste is prohibited under the Manual Scavenging Act (Prevention) 1993 which lays down punishment for people who employ workers to do this job.

Manjula Pradeep, executive directive of Navsarjan Trust, a Gujarat-based group working for the eradication of manual scavenging, says that governments have denied the magnitude of the problem. The group had filed a petition in the Gujarat High Court against the practice. "There have been independent surveys by groups like Tata Institute of Social Sciences. But the Gujarat government denied the existence of manual scavenging in the state," says Pradeep.

One reason why many states have refused to acknowledge the existence of this practice is because many government agencies themselves can be accused of breaking the law. The railways, according to Dinesh Berdiya of the group Sangharsh which has been campaigning for the complete abolishment of manual scavenging, is one of the biggest employers of such workers who are engaged to sweep away human wastes discharged from outdated train toilets into the railway tracks.

"The municipal corporation, the Public Works Department and housing societies employ sweepers to remove human waste on roads and toilet chambers. The railways

THE PRACTICE OF MANUAL REMOVAL OF HUMAN WASTE IS PROHIBITED UNDER THE MANUAL SCAVENGING PREVENTION ACT

employ people to clean the tracks of wastes from train toilets. People have to understand that employing people to do this work is a crime," says Berdiya who is a member of one of the committees formed to conduct the count of scavengers. The only way to ensure that employers can escape the law is by installing toilets that flush or, by using mechanised cleaners for this job.

Most of the conservancy workers employed by the municipal corporation, railways and other agencies are members of castes which were traditionally employed to do the job in villages and small towns. In Mumbai, the prohibitive cost of housing means that many of them continue to do the job done by their ancestors despite being qualified to take up other work.

Kishore Dathiya, a 40-year-old commerce graduate from Mulund, is one of them. He works as a sweeper in the municipal corporation's T Ward office. He was employed as a marketing professional but took up his father's job as a conservancy worker after the latter's retirement. "We are staying in a house given by the municipal corporation. I was forced to take up the job to keep the house," says Dathiya.

Dathiya could have accessed other government jobs as a member of a scheduled caste but, his parents and grandparents, who were illiterate, have no documents to prove that they belong to that group.

The Mumbai count will, hopefully, help younger members of the community to grab their constitutional rights to government jobs and seats in educational institution. But, even before the survey could begin, there is already a flurry of misinformation that threatens to derail the project.

"People are being told by their employers that if they answer the survey, they could lose their jobs as conservancy workers," says Berdiya.