

Caste factor in waste disposal

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Whatever happened to the jetting machines that are meant to avoid situations like this? File photo: Mohammed Yousuf The Hindu

Most people who work with waste belong to the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. This was the topic of the panel discussion at “Wake Up, Clean Up Bengaluru”, the ongoing waste management exposition, here on Saturday.

The lack of facilities and benefits to those involved in manual scavenging were all discussed and debated.

Inhuman practice

Journalist and filmmaker Nupur Basu, quoting a study, said that 1.3 million Dalits were involved in manual scavenging.

Dayanand, whose research has focussed on manual scavenging, pointed out that Karnataka had had a law in place against manual scavenging in 1975, before the Union government passed the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993.

“However, the inhuman practice still continues. Wherever the underground drainage network does not exist, Dalits are hired to clean the soak-pits and remove night soil,” he said.

Manhole deaths

He said that the government claimed that manholes would be cleaned by jetting machines. “How is this possible when 87 per cent of the

State does not have underground drainage network?” he asked. Though the government claimed that there was no manual scavenging in the State, over the past two years, 28 manual scavengers had died of asphyxiation while on work in 23 districts.

S. Balan, president of the Bruhat Bangalore Mahanagara Palike Contract Pourakarmikas Union, said that the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes continued to be stigmatised as scavenging staff, while the globalised world had now labelled them as “housekeepers and restroom keepers”.

“There are over one lakh families in the city that are dependent on earning from collecting and disposing of waste,” he said.

Other than the 17,000 contract pourakarmikas and 4,000 pourakarmikas, Dalits were employed in the airport, multinational companies, public sector enterprises and other corporate companies.

“There are agents whose primary job is to visit the railway station everyday and recruit people from the North East to work as housekeeping staff,” he said.

Stories to be told

Senior journalist K.S. Dakshinamurthy said that there were two aspects to manual scavenging — one that it exists and another that it is linked to caste. “The implication of this is diabolical. The media can only do so much... it can only shine a light on what is happening. For sustained impact, many stories have to be told. Unfortunately, commercialisation has set in media and such stories don’t make the cut in most mainstream media,” he said.

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