

SOCIAL DETERMINANTS CONTRIBUTING FOR PERSISTENT MANUAL SCAVENGING PRACTICES – A CASE STUDY

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Abstract

Arunthathiyars are forced to engage in menial jobs such as scavenging works like removal of human excreta, removal of animal carcass, etc., mending of shoes, slippers, leathers, drums, etc, burning of deceased human bodies, playing bands for funerals and other practices. This study aimed at unveiling the types of manual scavenging practices the manual scavengers engaged on and to observe the social determinants that prevent them to relieve from such scavenging practices. Case study method was adopted by considering the Edayapottalpatti village in Srivilliputhur block in Virudhunagar district. Qualitative techniques such as non-participant observations and focus group discussion with the manual scavengers were conducted for primary data collection. Less education, controlled occupation mobility and restricted association of the focused manual scavengers and the poor inertia of law have pushed them to continue in the manual scavenging practices.

Key words: *Arunthathiyars, Manual scavenging practice*

INTRODUCTION

In Tamil Nadu, Arunthathiyar communities are socially divided in the lowest strata. They can be termed as oppressed of the oppressed. Conventionally they are forced to engage in menial jobs such as scavenging works like removal of human excreta, removal of animal carcass, etc., mending of shoes, slippers, leathers, drums, etc, burning of deceased human bodies, playing bands for funerals and other practices (Srivastava, 1997). There is a pathetic situation that even educated Arunthathiyars are forced to enter into manual scavenging practices. The existing legislations have provisioned for closure of dry latrines but there are various forms of manual scavenging practices that are not exposed in the Acts as occupationally hazardous and for putting an end to such practices.

Manual scavenging is defined as the removal of excreta manually from dry toilets (Singh, 2009). In many villages, the practice of manual scavenging, the removal of human excrement, is only undertaken by Dalits (Artis, Doobay, & Lyons, 2003). Since 1993, cleaning of dry latrines and transporting of human excreta has been banned. Under the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, the employment of scavengers or the construction of dry latrines (which are not connected to a drainage system) might lead to imprisonment up to one year and or a fine of Rs 2,000. Offenders are also liable to prosecution under the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989. Nevertheless the manual scavenging practices are not completely abolished from the soil. The manual scavenging practices have taken different forms that hammer the life and dignity of those engaged in it.

There are reports that have showcased the prevailing manual scavenging practices in various parts of India. The International Dalit Solidarity Network (2002) investigation showed that in the absence of an adequate economic alternative, it is often seen that manual scavengers are not able to quit their degrading work. In Madhya Pradesh on an average, each family makes about Rs.500 per month by manual scavenging. Besides, they get old clothes and sweets during the festival season or during special occasions in the village. People's Union for Civil Liberties- Karnataka (2011) revealed the gruesome death of two scavengers when engaged in scavenging occupation.

Fourteen-year-old Ravi used to be a beneficiary under the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) 2007 as his mother cleaned toilets in the village. One day, when she gathered enough courage to quit the job, Ravi's scholarship funds were stopped and she faced hostility from the villagers who said, 'If you don't clean our shit, then who will?' Belonging to a family of six siblings, daily life has become difficult for Ravi. His mother is not getting any other job due to the stigma attached to her past one. (The Hindu, March 30, 2011). A study by the Indian Institute of Management, Ahmedabad has found that the city's sanitation workers continue to work without safety equipment, spend a quarter of their income on medical treatment and remain, except for a handful, unaware of schemes tailored for them or the fact that physically carrying human excreta or night soil and entering manholes is prohibited. Most of these families were staying without toilets and

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running water facilities at their houses made of mud, wood and bamboo (The Indian Express, February 21, 2012).

According to Safai Karmachari Andolan's (SKA) study report showed that the manual scavenging practices in town panchayats of Madurai, Theni, Dindigul and Devarappanpatti village panchayat. The permanent sanitary workers have been harassed by the sanitary officials and also have been threatened not to reveal their profession. The SKA has urged the Secretary of State Water Supply department, the Municipal Administration and the State to take immediate action against such officers. The demolition of dry latrines would end the practice and conversion of these toilets into water flush ones is the solution to the issue. (Ravichandran, 2008).

Agricultural Finance Corporation Ltd (2007) studied the integrated low cost sanitation scheme. Though 96.0 percent of the sample sanitation workers belonged to depressed segment among scheduled castes, there are a few scheduled tribes and persons from general caste who are engaged currently as sanitation workers. The latter of course is the extremely poor or migrant who could get no other jobs. However, non- SC sanitation workers do not remove night soil. About 26.0 percent do not have dwelt with full ownership title. About 65.0 percent of the sanitation workers are illiterate and only 30.0 percent are educated upto primary level. The low level of literacy is the reason that they are not aware of any development programmes for their well being. The average income of 80.0 percent of sanitation workers is Rs 3300/- per month. 11.0 percent of sanitation workers are still continuing with removal of night soil in Tumkur, Udgir, Lucknow, Jalpaiguri and Gorakhpur towns. Thirty percent of the sanitation workers know about the rehabilitation package. It is interesting to know that in Gorakhpur and Dasna towns where many dry latrines still exist have knowledge about the assistance. About 52.0 percent of the sanitation workers felt that their status in the society has increased as compared to earlier days.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed at unveiling the types of manual scavenging practices the manual scavengers engaged on and to observe the social determinants that prevent them to relieve from such scavenging practices.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Case study method was adopted by considering the Edayalpottalpatti village in Srivilliputhur block in Virudhunagar district. The Edayalpottalpatti village is located 4 kms away from Srivilliputhur town and 7 kms away from Rajapalayam town. In this village, around 200 Arunthathiyar families, about 800 Nadar families and a few other communities are living. Qualitative techniques such as non-participant observations and focus group discussion with the manual scavengers were conducted for collecting the primary data. Around 12 manual scavengers from the focus village participated in the focus group discussion. One of the research team members stayed in the village and observed the social factors influencing in sustaining the manual scavenging practices among the Arunthathiyar communities. The actual data collection was conducted during January and February 2013.

The major outcomes of the study are:

- Around 52 Arunthathiyars are engaged in manual scavenging practices. Of whom about 26 of them are females. These manual scavengers have not crossed middle school level education. They became as manual scavengers through transfer of the occupation from their familial lineage.
- The manual scavengers are engaged in cleaning the drainage, cleaning the public toilets, removing the human excreta in the streets, removing the human bodies and animal carcass and cleaning the septic tanks. Most of them are engaged in more than one scavenging practice. They are engaged in the scavenging occupation through contractors, who are assigned by the government. The manual scavengers receive a wage of Rs.100 to Rs.150 per day. The family members at times engage as substitute workers in the scavenging occupation.
- The manual scavengers of the Edayalpottalpatti village live in a poor housing, which has constrained space to accommodate an average 4 to 5 members in a house. They are landless and have no savings. They are trapped in debts, which are borrowed for delivery, ear piercing, festival for the girl attaining puberty, pilgrimage, rituals, village festivals and death rituals. Most of their earnings go to repay the interests.
- The Arunthathiyars are often engaged in the manual scavenging practices. Particularly the Arunthathiyars from Edayalpottalpatti cover many areas of Srivilliputhur and Rajapalayam blocks. They wake up early in the morning and go for employment. Since in most families both the husband and wife are engaged in the occupation, the young children are left out of care. Even they are not in a state to send their children regularly to school.

- Arunthathiyars are discriminated by the dominant communities based on caste but the manual scavengers belong to Arunthathiyar communities are further discriminated, which is based on the scavenging occupations they are engaged on. When the manual scavengers are on their *kakee* uniform, the other communities do not associate with them. They feel that they are not respected in the society and believed that it is their destiny.
- As the manual scavengers are engaged in an unhealthy and sluggish working condition, they are conditioned to consume alcohol. Without consuming alcohol they are not able to work. Even the women engaged in manual scavenging also habituated to drink alcohol. The employers compensate the wages by supplying liquors to them.
- The manual scavengers of the Edayalpottalpatti are not associated with any of the social movements working for the empowerment of the manual scavengers. The Arunthathiyars in some of the nearby villages have left the manual scavenging occupation after the interventions of the Arunthamizhar Viduthalai Iyakkam, a movement working for Arunthathiyar's empowerment. But this movement struggles to associate the manual scavengers of the Edayalpottalpatti village. So, the employers have cornered the Arunthathiyars of the Edayalpottalpatti to engage in the scavenging occupation.
- The manual scavengers are submissive and obliged to the dominant communities, who have a social mindset that the Arunthathiyars are born to do such practices. They tie-up their hands while talking to persons belonging to upper castes. In the village tea shops, they normally do not drink tea along with other customers. They often stand behind the shop and drink tea. They have not actualized that such practices are dehumanizing them. They have realized it but considering as their fate they are not able to explore way to emancipate them from dehumanizing practices.

CONCLUSION

Manual scavenging practices exist in many forms and the people belonging to scheduled caste communities are engaged in such practices. The Arunthathiyars who are engaged in manual scavenging, do not have alternative employment to renounce the scavenging practices. Though in the modern times, the occupational mobility has increased for the rural caste suppressed masses to find out alternative employment to have dignified life. But less education, controlled occupation mobility and restricted association of the focused manual scavengers and the poor inertia of law to abolish the manual scavenging have pushed them to continue in the manual scavenging practices.

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