

Building Life-affirming Communities: Face To Face with the many poor and the many faiths in Asia

Manual Scavengers in India

Why should other people remove another people's shit? -Bezwada Wilson

Introduction

Manual scavenging is a lifting and removal of human excreta in India. There are two ways of doing scavenging. Firstly, it is through dry toilets, where human excreta is left on a stone, plate, mud, or in a bucket. The scavengers must remove the excreta to a place of disposal. Secondly, scavengers must clean sewage pits, both in private homes and in cities. While private pits are cleaned under cover of darkness, it is a common sight to find men opening manholes to go down and manually clean sewers. However, manual scavenging was banned by a formal Act of parliament in 1993. This paper focuses on the abuse and discrimination of the so-called Dalits. It raises the awareness of human rights and the respect of the *Imago Dei* in the so-called 'Dalits' people, if one look at them must see God in their lives. The paper will use Bezwada Wilson's oral lecture presented in March 2019 in Delhi, India on the manual scavenging dilemma faced by the Dalits.

Who are the Scavengers?

Scavengers are the people of low-caste, the so-called 'Dalits' in particular. According to Hindi social hierarchy they are untouchables. Of course, manual scavenging and untouchability is a caste discrimination. The Dalits are forced to have least desirable occupations such as cleaning, sweeping, leatherwork, removal of human excreta, removal of human and cattle corpses etc.

Context:

A Historical Overview of Manual Scavenging in Asia

Manual Scavenging is dominant across Asia. Migrants from Andhra Pradesh went to Bangladesh and Sri Lanka to do this work. Bucket toilet were prevalent in Africa and the Far East; China had manual scavengers without a belonging to any caste. In India, people had waterborne toilets in each house which were linked by drains covered by burnt clay bricks. These toilet systems consisted of manholes and chambers. When the British empire came into India, they legitimised and systematised everything according to the norms of India, they set up army cantonments and municipalities. They created official posts of manual scavengers. All British institutions – the army, railways, courts, industries and major towns were equipped with dry toilets instead of waterborne sewerage. The upheavals caused by the commercialisation of land, destruction of artisan trades and frequent famines, pushed people out of traditional occupations and agriculture-related activities to sweep and scavenging. This is not to say that the British invented caste or manual scavengers; rather they wanted to adapt and inverted

specifically to institutionalise it. The technology they had was supposed to remove social prejudice but instead the technology of sanitation was structured to deepen social bias in India. During and after the partition, the Pakistan state, despite the ethnic cleaning of Hindus, refused to allow the 'untouchables' involved in safai karamhari work to emigrate to India. While the Indian government tried to secure safe passage for the Hindus of Pakistan, there was no concern about the dalit 'Hindus' left behind in Pakistan, not that a better life awaited them in India. In Andhra Pradesh, manual scavenging became a widespread practice with increasing urbanisation in the late 19th century. The destruction of artisan trade and imposition of property relations and commercialisation of land by the British caused social upheavals. Urbanised groups, led by the privileged cast, did not think of setting up a proper underground drainage system like the Nizam of Hyderabad did back in the 1930s. this period witnessed the importation of people to do a job that even local Dalits refused to do. Some of the Dalits communities engaged in agricultural labour were gradually brought into the ambit of scavenging. In a context where the Dalits were largely not allowed to own land, and where they were pushed by worsening circumstances in villages urbanisation and the need for sweepers and scavengers was a 'pull' factor. This attest that poverty coupled with untouchability-by-birth can push people and communities into scavenging.

The Origin of Untouchability in India

The word 'dalit' means the oppressed or broken victims of society. The term derives from the roots of 'dall' meaning the poor, be low, be reduced and helpless. Approximately 48 percent of the population in India is poor (George 2007:189). Dalits were deprived the right to education, health care, clean water and other government benefits. The untouchable caste was deprived the right to live inside towns or villages they had to live outside the main dwellings; they were not permitted to walk on the streets without identity markers. In Kerala, they had to tie a broom behind them, and a mud pot under their chin so that their polluting spit would not pollute the ground. In Rajasthan, the untouchables had to call out 'Payse!' meaning "keep a distance" and had to wear a crow's feather on their turban. People of high caste will not take food or water with them and they could not intermarry with them. If one is a Dalit, he/she is not only being oppressed but also stigmatised and treated as less-human. They live in hovels alongside the heaps of filth places where there is no proper arrangement for toilets, drainage, ventilation or provision of clean drinking water or light. I am of the view that Dalits are forced to work under inhuman condition cleaning the shit for other people.

In the twentieth century, the British empire freed Dalits from a destiny preordained by the Hindu God and enforced by the Hindu State. This was the time when the East India Company required soldiers, employed untouchables and enforced them to formal education for all Indian soldiers and their children. With education and non-traditional employment, Dalits began to stir. By the 1930s, it became evident that the Dalits were embarking to assert their rights under the leadership of Dr B.R. Ambedkar. On the other hand, Mohandas Gandhi held out aid to the Dalits attempted to help individuals among them, however, Ambedkar viewed Gandhi's deeds as killing Dalits with kindness. Gandhi continued to be an

advocate of the Dalits in the letter he wrote; *"I love scavenging...I do not want to be reborn, but if I have to be reborn, I should be born an untouchable, so that I may share their sorrows, suffering and the affronts levelled to them, in order that I may endeavour to free myself and them from that miserable condition."* Ambedkar did not understand why some people should clean up for other people, hence he called for all Dalits to stop doing polluting practices; *"You should realise that you are cleaning Hindu Society."* I am of the view that scavenging is not a matter of choice but of force. For it becomes evident that in India a man is not a scavenger because of his work but he is a scavenger because of his birth. Dalits must stop unclean jobs and turn to education.

Scavenging and Caste

One would ask how is scavenging related to caste? In the Hindu society caste is the dominant discourse where privileged caste people the so-called Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Visayas are not responsible of cleaning after themselves. The so-called Dalits are the ones who should clean their dirt because they were 'born' to do that. No one cares about the Dalit's health. In the western world human excreta is the one of the main causes of diseases – diarrhoea, together with malnutrition, respiratory diseases and endemic malaria are the main causes of death among children infants in developing countries. In India, excreta is seen as impure. There may have been a large element of common grounds between science and traditional practise. The idea may have been to help prohibit the spread of fatally infectious diseases, but the notion has now calcified. Traditional practice has failed to keep up with scientific disposal of excreta, leading to skewed practices, particularly in the matter of having someone else to clean up behind us. Excreta avoidance is normalised: the bath is taken after defecation, and caste-Hindu parents will insist when their children are very young that children sit for defecation before bath. The left hand is used for washing the anus, while the right hand is used for eating and for other 'clean' activities. Defecation is done at a distance from the house because it is believed that its polluting, it does not occur inside the house, this was regarded as truth until a huge urbanisation of the last five decades. The Hindu society did not care about public places such as roads or railways were soiled by excreta., but as long the house was free from excretions. People in rural areas avoided having inside toilets in their houses to keep their houses clean. Therefore, scavenging and caste intimately linked.

Mohandas Gandhi vs B.R. Ambedkar on Manual Scavenging

Gandhi was of the view that manual scavenging is the 'sacred' work of cleanliness. Everyone who is doing this work deserves to be honoured and he advised the scavengers not to detest and hate the Brahmins because hatred causes pain; *"I love scavenging. In my Ashram, an eighteen-year-old Brahmin lad is doing the scavenger's work in order to teach the Ashram cleanliness."* Anyone can see that Gandhi's stance on scavenging is about 'cleaning'. However, the question remains why is that most scavengers are Dalits? On the other hand, Ambedkar said, *"you should realise that you are cleaning Hindu society."* According to Ambedkar scavenging was not the issue, however, the problem was that why are the Dalits cleaning after Hindu society? If Hindu people were cleaning after themselves and

Dalits taking responsibility of their own waste that was not going to be a big deal. Therefore, Ambedkar fought for equality for all people in India that they should be treated with respect and must all be judge according to their character, not with social status.

I am failing to understand why Gandhi made an example of a Brahmin who did scavenger's job to justify scavenging as a good thing. I am convinced that he was not standing with the oppressed, Gandhi did not know how it feels to remove people's waste every day, not because one liked to, because one was forced by the birth system of untouchability and poverty. I disagree with Gandhi, I do not think it was good telling people that even high-caste was prepared to do scavenger's work when it is evident that according to Hindu society even if a Brahmin did scavenge, he would never be subject to disabilities of one who is born a scavenger. For in India a man is not a scavenger for his work. He is a scavenger because of his birth. According to Gandhi, scavenging was a noble profession that one had to not to be ashamed of it. For him, discrimination in public for low-caste was a good thing and they deserved a noble price. One can conclude that preaching poverty is a good thing for the untouchables.

Bezwada Wilson: Shepherd of the Manual Scavengers

Bezwada Wilson is the scavenger's watch. The 53-year-old man is the unquestioned leader of the Safai Karamchari Andolan. Most people in India regard him as Ambedkar of safai karmcharis because he is on the side of the oppressed. By the year Wilson was born in 1966, the Kolar township had a population of about two lakhs. Sanitation in the town was a saga of neglect. There were no individuals' toilets; instead, the British devised large workers to clean up the waste, the workers came from Andhra, like Wilson's family. There were 236 workers with 1500 seats in all, each manual scavenger had one seat to clean, the 108 manual scavengers were permanent employees. The scavengers in Kolar did not use just baskets; they needed baskets to empty the shit into large bins; these bins were then emptied into tractors and taken to a dump on the outskirts. In 1982, he was involved with various church-based social activities – Sunday school for children, road cleaning campaigns, tree-planting, adult education and deaddiction from alcoholism. He noticed that children could drop out from school to be recruited as manual scavengers or sanitary workers. Wilson was then more interested to help these children to find better jobs than scavenging. Wilson's work with the deaddiction pushed him once again into work on scavenging. Most scavengers told him that they drank because they had to – the work forced them.

Wilson became curious; what was they work like? This is not to say he was completely unaware of it. In 1989, Wilson saw a man cleaning a dry toilet since the tractor to haul out waste arrived once in two days, the faeces were cleaned every day and dumped into a bin. The man was attempting to break the surface of the hardened excreta in the bin by hitting it with is bucket, when the bucket was pulled into the seething, soft mass inside. Not wanting to lose his bucket, the worker plunged his arm to lift the bucket, and tried to clean his soiled right arm with his clean right left. In a flash, Wilson saw this, and remember how he flung away the bucket, and shouted and wept like a mad man. From that day He took a stance of siding with the scavengers to combat the empire forcing people to work to such

conditions. Wilson understood that the problem for his community to work as scavengers was not that they are illiterate, poverty or alcoholism but it was because most of them were born as Dalits. Therefore, Wilson called for the abolition of human excreta. In May 1982, Wilson tried to work with the church to combat manual scavenging, but the church was more concerned about preaching the 'kingdom' hereafter, but not about the living hell today. While there were priests even refused to pray for the scavengers because they were unclean.

South Africa

In south Africa, there is nothing like scavenging and caste. however, the indirect similarities we share with the low-caste people of India is that we once had a dominant discourse of segregation according to the colour of the skin. Black people were believed to be less-humans and therefore, our ancestors were doing dirty jobs for the white supremacy. A black person was deprived human rights (education, land, shelter, health etc.) if there were filthy stinking places to be cleaned, black people were sent to those sections to clean up, it was not their choice, but the oppressors forced our ancestors to work in those conditions to earn food for the night. Our people were treated as animals. Black people were not allowed to go to cities, if one had to visit the city, he was carrying a passport that authorises him to be in town, transports and domains (toilets, restaurants) were written in bold that BLACKS ONLY and WHITS ONLY. If a black person was found trespassing, he was imprisoned without checking that he can read or not, obvious most of them could not read because education was not permitted to them. Our 'caste' in South Africa was apartheid. In my village toilets are cleaned by old people not children because it is believed that cleaning toilets is bad lucks, therefore, it is better to be cleaned by elders not young people, but still they do not remove waste for other people, but to clean the toilet seat and floor only.

Analysis:

How widespread is Manual Scavenging?

There are still places that consist of poor-flush toilets, scavenges are still guided into yet another line of this work. They use a piece of tin to lift the excrement into a woven basket lined with leaves to prevent leakage. They carry the basket on their shoulders to a place far away where all such refuse is dumped. They work in groups of ten with six buckets and as many drums as rickshaws. Some of these workers consume a good amount of alcohol before commencing work. Kerosene is poured on the surface of the sludge when the lid of the septic tank is opened – to enable the absorption of poisonous gases – and the man enters with the bucket into the solid mass of excreta whereas, another man is awaiting to lift the bucket up, and this is passed by human chain to the drum waiting in the rickshaw. They clean this shit in darkness because no one wants to see everybody shit. These workers are forced by poverty to work under these conditions and the government does not care for them, if they die in the pit they die for their families. It goes without saying that this system is evil. Therefore, the worker has accepted to soil themselves so that others can look clean. The high-caste people who promote this system do not send their relatives to this work, only those who are not family. Scavengers experience a very physical form of discrimination in their daily lives. For example, shopkeepers do not take money from their hands;

the money is put on the counter where water is sprinkled on it, and only then taken merely because their work is impure. If the community have local business of cleaning, they are not permitted to take up domestic work such as cleaning the house and washing vessels. They are only expected to remove human waste. Manual human excreta is unavoidable to the scavengers because most cases water is running out in public domains. People leave their shit all over the place in public toilets, hospitals and in clinics, the urine and blood need to be removed by them. After doing this job scavengers remain poor. they live in tiny households without electricity because they cannot pay for it.

Manual Scavenging, Manifestation and Impacts of Caste Today

According to activist Bezwada Wilson who has called a nationwide protest on Sept. 25.2018 against manual scavenging.

The state must see that the law enforcing agencies are functioning. I must say that very clearly, these (deaths) are murders by the state. Deaths of sanitation workers while cleaning sewers by hand, a practice banned 25 years ago, is nothing but “murders by the state”, Six people died while cleaning sewers in Delhi this month alone. Such workers, called manual scavengers, belong to the lower-caste communities that face extreme discrimination.

Manual scavenging is happening even today. The question is: how does it happening under the government's watch? The fact is that the government does not care about the low-cast people. poor people are still forced to do dirty jobs because they want to provide food for their families. How can interfaith body respond to this act? My exposure to almost all major religions in the face to face programme India 2019, I have realised that most of religions wants to be stewards of peace and justice, and that make us to become one because everyone wants peace and justice. no one want to see people dying because of scavenging. However, one cannot deny fact that the legacy of caste is a predominant discourse in India today.

Dalits are buried in their own space and Brahmins in their own space. Dalit have their own schools because they cannot afford private schools, teachers are most Brahmins which means they are biased. It is still a challenge for dalits communities to marry outside their community. Brahmins are the most educated and rich people, they are doctors, lawyers, teachers, government officials, and land owners. Dalits are still struggling to find voice in government and local communities.

Some people of India are afraid to become visible Christians in public because the government will not support them with social benefits and that make their lives difficult. For that reason, they have formed their own fellowships centred around on Jesus Christ values and principles. The unbaptised Christians are swimming against the mainstream of the Christian culture. They are between baptism and their own

traditional cultures. While affirming their own cultural values and its symbols many of these 'anonymous Christians' reject baptism. Some accept baptism, but their practices are so called 'non-Christian.' These people are not ready to reveal their Christian identity nor ready to identify with 'traditional Christians.' They never claim that are Christian, but they would like to be called as Hindu in culture. It is mainly because revealing one's conversion to Christianity may on the hand bring more isolation in the community and on the other hand bring problems to the Christian community.

What Has Been Done to Stop Scavenging?

Number of people's movements (Dalit Activist – Bezwada Wilson and educationalists), organisations (Dalits watch, Dalits Christian Watch, Hindu Dalits Watch, India Peace Center) and churches (National Council of Churches in India) has emerged to combat this evil practise and many more. All these movements are tackling the issue of bringing back the dignity of a human being who is a labelled the stigma of being a Dalit.

What You Can Do?

Wherever you live, there is a lot you can do. To start with you, you could reflect upon and question skewed distribution of resources. It could also assist if the society works together to contact the local media to take them around the dry toilets and ensure coverage. One can write a letter to the newspapers and magazines to alert them about this evil thing. Therefore, the authorities will be forced to act once the matter is made public. India peace centre, churches, mosques, temples and other organisations could be roped in to raise awareness.

Conclusion

I do not understand why someone should clean up my shit. Where is justice in that? Why people are so evil to an extent that they can disrespect the *Imago Dei* like this? Scavenging is not a matter of choice, it is a matter of force. Today there some people India who think scavenging is a noble profession because of Gandhi, they justify the oppression of Dalits. Surprisingly, most religions in India promote peace and justice, yet people are victimised in the name of religion. For example, under Hinduism scavenging is the duty of the Dalits. It becomes evident that impure work is done by the slaves and that impure work includes scavenging. I condemn caste-Hindus for observing untouchability which I call a dark spot on Hinduism because untouchability to me is a sin. If the concept of *dharma* (some are born to lead, and some are born to serve) can be removed in Hinduism that would be the end of caste system.

I believe that religion (church) is called to build life-affirming to the many poor and many communities. Life-affirming is not only about responding to social needs like poverty, building houses for the homeless, delivering of clean water, education, health care etc. I am convinced that life-affirming is also about good morals. A good religion is the one that lives by good morals, teaching people to do good to

one-another. A religion that will teach people to clean after themselves. It's disturbing to see religion that does not speak truth to power; a religion that want to talk about the kingdom hereafter, but not about the living hell today. Life-affirming means to stand with the oppressed, to unmask the evil empire, to cry aloud in protest calling for humans right like Bezwada Wilson who formed a movement against scavenging.

In south Africa, black people were treated as slaves, we lived in isolation because of our skin colour, not permitted to vote. We were treated like objects. Today black people are treated the same as white people because church led the struggle of condemning racism, with the same spirit of my country, it is my dream to see God in the lives of the so-called Dalits, where they will be treated with respect and receive equal opportunities as citizens of India, and that would be life-affirming.

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