

# The Great Scavenger – Plotting Manual Scavenging and Reuse of Night Soil in Gandhi’s Vision

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**Abstract:** *The paper focuses on the manual scavengers of India, who continue to be engaged in the caste-based occupation. The overwhelming majority of the scavengers are Dalits, who have inherited this occupation from their forefathers. This study seeks to understand the writings and ideas of Gandhi on manual scavenging, as well as examining the contrasting views against these ideas. By making a critical study of the Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan as well as other legislature, we seek to understand the intersectionality between manual scavengers, Gandhi and Swachh Bharat Abhiyaan, and whether any concrete changes have been made in the lives of these manual scavengers after Independence. This paper further explores if the issue of manual scavenging should not be limited as a social issue but also as an environmental issue. Gandhi’s ideas on the reuse of night soil contributing to sustainable living are understood. Additionally the paper explores the lived experience of a scavenger in our community. This helped the researchers gain a human insight and build contemporary understanding of the issues.*

**Keywords:** *Gandhi, manual scavengers, Valmiki, Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, Sarvodaya.*

“I may not be born again, but if it happens I will like to be born into a family of scavengers, so that I may relieve them of the inhuman, unhealthy, and hateful practice of carrying night soil.”

-Mahatma Gandhi

## 1. INTRODUCTION:

“The vibrant face of modern India has an ugly stain- the practice of manual scavenging”.<sup>1</sup> Even today, people are unaware of the reality that a social evil like “manual scavenging” or the process of removing untreated human excreta from private and public dry toilets<sup>2</sup>, open drains, bucket toilets

<sup>1</sup>Indira Khurana, former WaterAid’s Head of Policy

<sup>2</sup> Dry toilets – Toilets that do not flush, is not connected to a septic tank or a sewage system, and requires daily manual cleaning

or dry latrines still exists in contemporary times. People from communities that have ‘traditionally’ been communities of manual scavengers collect human excreta on a daily basis, load it into buckets, sometimes using bare hands, brooms or metal scrappers and carry it on their heads for disposal on the outskirts of the town or city. The rest of India, on the other hand, chooses not to talk about this social evil, because they consider this work to be “dirty work”<sup>3</sup> and beneath them.

Consistent with the terminology used in the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, manual scavengers in this paper is meant to refer to “a person engaged or employed, at the commencement of this Act or at any time thereafter, by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contractor, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces or premises, as the Central Government or a State Government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed, and the expression “manual scavenging” shall be construed accordingly.”<sup>4</sup>

## 2. METHODOLOGY:

This study was conducted by using both primary and secondary sources of information. For primary source - An interaction in the form of an open ended interview was conducted with a willing Manual Scavenger. For secondary sources, journals and books were consulted. It was firstly important to understand Gandhi’s views on manual scavenging, and then move on to understand the state of manual scavengers both pre-independence and post-independence, and importantly in our current environment..

<sup>3</sup>Pathak, Bindeshwar

<sup>4</sup>Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013

### 3. GANDHI AND HUMAN SCAVENGING:

Gandhi's fight with human scavenging goes back to his childhood. Even as a child, he never discriminated with the sweepers who used to come to his house to clean the latrine. At the age of 12, he spoke in terms of social reform when he told his mother: 'Uka (a sweeper) serves us by cleaning dirt and filth, how can his touch pollute me? I shall not disobey you, but the Ramayana says that Rama embraced Guhaka, a Chandal (a caste considered untouchable). The Ramayana cannot mislead us.' He could never think of having a set of people labeled "untouchable" because of their work, for cleaning filth and dirt.

But as a principle, Gandhi learnt scavenging in South Africa. Even though back home, he tried to incorporate self-cleaning in the house, due to restrictions imposed by his parents, he was not even allowed to talk to or touch the manual scavengers that used to visit his house. It was only in South Africa that he was able to practically implement his ideas. His friends there lovingly called him the "Great Scavenger". In return, Gandhi used to say that "every person should be his own scavenger". He used to criticise many western customs but repeatedly admitted that he learnt sanitation from the west. He wanted to introduce that type of cleanliness in India.

Gandhi strongly emphasized observing cleanliness in lavatories, and wrote "I shall have to defend myself on one point, namely, sanitary conveniences. I learnt 35 years ago that a lavatory must be as clean as a drawing-room. I learnt this in the West. I believe that many rules about cleanliness in lavatories are observed more scrupulously in the West than in the East. The cause of many of our diseases is the condition of our lavatories and our bad habit of disposing of excreta anywhere and everywhere. I, therefore, believe in the absolute necessity of a clean place for answering the call of nature and clean articles for use at the time. I have accustomed myself to them and wish that all others should do the same. The habit has become so firm in me that even if I wished to change it I would not be able to do so. Nor do I wish to change it."<sup>5</sup>

Gandhi used to believe that "so long as you do not take the broom and the bucket in your hands, you cannot make your towns and cities clean".

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<sup>5</sup>Navajivan on 24 May, 1925

Mahatma Gandhi considered manual scavenging to be a sin against humanity and god, and throughout his lifetime, tried to change the status of manual scavengers in the society. In his ashram, for example, he insisted that every member of the ashram, including his wife take on the rotating task of cleaning the latrines. All scavenging work in his ashram was done by the inmates.

### 4. MANUAL SCAVENGING IN INDIA:

'I live in a hole

Do you see my soul covered in a thick black layer of skatole?

I, man of no age, born to an unprivileged family.

We haven't rose above this from many a century.

Who am I you ask?

An untouchable bereft of mask.

I collect your garbage, sweep your city streets

Clean your gutters and shit you excrete

Cockroaches and insects of all sorts,  
I am swarmed by them at all times, you must have read that in the reports.

The drains are so deep, bearing a gloomy gus,  
They can easily fit a double-decker bus.

I stay inside for hours clearing the rut,  
I come out shivering, feeling completely shut.  
Yet I get little appreciation for the courage I possess,  
And I often wonder if the distress is ever going to be replaced by progress.

When I lift to my mouth a morsel of food  
It smells like sewage, so merciless, so crude.  
But I still eat.  
To keep my family alive, to let their heart beat."<sup>6</sup>

This poem captures the plight of the invisible ones who do the dirty jobs, so that we can keep our hands clean.

State-wise data collection regarding number of manual scavengers remains a problem because most of the data is clearly under-stated official

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<sup>6</sup>The above is a except of a poem written by Era Tangar for his article "A Tribute To The Invisible Ones Who Do The Dirty Job, So We Can Keep Our Hands Clean" published by Scoopwhoop on Nov 11, 2016

figures. Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Jammu and Kashmir, Bihar, Maharashtra, Tamil Nadu and West Bengal accounted for more than 72% of unsanitary latrines in India, according to a United Nations report. Uttar Pradesh, the state with the most officially acknowledged manual scavengers (10,016) admits to 2404 in urban areas and 7612 in rural areas. As per the Houselifting and Housing Census 2011, there are more than 7.94 latrines in the country from which night soil is removed by humans. However, the number of persons still engaged in manual scavenging is not known.<sup>7</sup>

In India the persistence of manual scavenging is directly linked to the Hindu caste system, with about 1.8 million Dalits, making a living as manual scavengers. In older times, considering the fact that there were no modern toilets and human excreta had to be collected from chamber-pots, this job fell to the extreme lower rungs of society. The perpetual continuity of manual scavenging shows how casteism is still deeply integrated in the Indian society. Despite concrete laws being enacted against this social evil, the process of a group of people belonging to a specific caste still collecting human excreta, just because their descendants have for centuries doing the same, is indeed an ignominy.

“People work as manual scavengers because their caste is expected to fulfil this role, and are typically unable to get any other work. This practice is considered one of the worst surviving symbols of untouchability because it reinforces the social stigma that these castes are untouchable and perpetuates discrimination and social exclusion.”<sup>8</sup>

People who belong to the Balmiki caste (or Valmiki caste), people who are supposed to be descendants of Sage Valmiki who wrote the saga Ramayana, have been collecting human excreta for a living since centuries.

The women clean dry toilets, men and women both clean excreta from open defecation sites, gutters, and drains, and the men are called upon to do the more physically demeaning work of cleaning sewers and septic tanks. There is a stigma attached to them in the society because of their occupations, and they are considered as ‘untouchable’ even by the other erstwhile ‘untouchable’ castes in the Hindu society. While there are some studies that

show that in the community, there is male migration for education and jobs, women still continue to work as manual scavengers because of family pressure. Caste-based occupation is thus even being recast and reiterated in this way.

#### 5. AMBEDKAR’S CRITIQUE OF GANDHI:

However, Gandhi and Ambedkar followed different approaches to the abolition of untouchability and the eradication of the practice of manual scavenging. Gandhi had said that manual scavenging was similar to a mother cleaning the bottom of her child. He used to never criticise the work done by the scavengers, even going to some extent comparing it to the work done by a lawyer, thus never going against the work.

On the other hand, B.R. Ambedkar had often pointed out that in India, a man is not a scavenger because of his work. He is a scavenger because of his birth. His/her plight is then linked to the brutal realities of the caste system. Thus taking a dig at Gandhi, he used to say that it is incorrect to preach to the manual scavenger about the dignity of labour.

Therefore while Gandhi advocated change of heart and morality on the part of the oppressor castes, B.R. Ambedkar called for political praxis, agitation and legal intervention, especially by the victims of the caste system.<sup>9</sup> Gandhi wanted to improve the status of manual scavengers in society, while Ambedkar wanted to remove the whole system of birth-based manual scavengers.

#### 6. WOMEN MANUAL SCAVENGERS:

“Saraswati doesn’t remember the last time her bare hands touched the statues of the gods lying in a corner of her one-room house in Farrukhnagar village of Ghaziabad district. She doesn’t remember the last time she prayed or fasted. She says every part of her body stinks—stinks even after multiple baths.”<sup>10</sup>

Women are the worst victims as they constitute most of the work force of manual scavengers. At least 80-90% of India’s estimated 1.8 million manual scavengers are women, according to a campaign group Jan Sahas.

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<sup>7</sup>Data released by the Registrar General of India in March, 2012, Press Information Bureau, Government of India, Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment

<sup>8</sup> [Meenakshi Ganguly](#), South Asia director at Human Rights Watch

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<sup>9</sup>Choudhury, Sanjay Kumar, Dignity Defiled: Law and Policies for Manual Scavengers, [countercurrents.org](http://countercurrents.org), 2011

<sup>10</sup><http://epaper.livemint.com/epaper/viewer.aspx>

This is a common problem in manual scavenging policy and discussions overall—definition changes! Earlier, we used the 2013 definition, which includes people who work on railways, septic tanks, and sewers. This means that a majority are *not* women. However, women are disproportionately the ones who clean the dry latrines. Apart from the social stigma that they suffer, their work is low-paid. These women face the triple burden of caste, class, and gender. Due to severe scarcity of employment avenues, many of the women scavengers are compelled to adopt such an occupation out of compulsion. There are also reports of sexual harassment cases from supervisors, sanitary inspectors, conservancy officers and contractors, as well as upper caste men from their villages. It is ironical to see that untouchability does not extend to cases of sexual harassment.

Removing night soil mostly depends on the construction of the latrines. The system of removing excreta, as it exists today, is most unsanitary and in many cases quite primitive. For example, certain public toilet structures are nothing but two rows of raised seating back to back with a small gully of about one to two feet in width. There are no receptacles in such latrines and the human excreta drops directly on the ground, which has a backward slope. With the sheer force of gravity and ablution water, the night soil slopes backward into a drain in the gully and stagnates or flows into the cesspool. These structures, usually on both sides of the rows have trap doors for cleaning. The scavenger, usually a woman, has to enter the gully, clean the latrine seats with a broom or a spade, or whatever tool she has at her disposal. She then has to collect the night soil from the cesspool with the help of buckets. She is usually barefoot, and gets completely soiled in the process.<sup>11</sup> They do not have the availability of water for washing themselves after cleaning the toilets. They literally carry the foul smell with them till they clean themselves at their own homes.

Ninety percent of all manual scavengers have not been provided proper safety equipment like gloves, masks, boots and/or brooms to protect them from faeces borne illness,” said a report (Jan 2007) on safety by TISS Mumbai<sup>12</sup>. The use of hands by women manual scavengers, along with the certainty that they will have direct skin contact with human

waste, is a very dangerous combination that is contributing to countless diseases: TB, campylobacter infection, cryptosporidiosis, viral gastroenteritis and sometimes even death.

Not only this, women manual scavengers have even been threatened by the houses they were serving when they asked to leave. In retaliation, they were denied access to community land and resources or even threatened with rape threats and eviction from the villages. It is often done with the backing of the village authorities, including the police, gram panchayats and other governmental officers. Their upper-caste employers frequently use caste as a cover for exploitative economic arrangements: social sanction of their status as lesser beings allows their impoverishment to continue.

#### 7. HUMAN SCAVENGING: AN ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUE:

The issue of manual scavenging should not only be addressed as a social issue but also an environmental issue

Today, Water pollution is a major environmental issue in India. One of the principal contributors to this environmental concern is the dumping of untreated human excreta from pit latrines, septic tanks, drains and railway lines by manual scavengers into the proximal lakes and rivers. Since human excreta is nonchalantly discharged into the water sources, it pollutes and intoxicates water bodies and also affects the entire biosphere – plants and organisms living in these bodies of water.

Also, lay concept to the manual removal of human raw excreta is substantial concern for health of manual scavengers as those who engage in this practice are exposed to most virulent forms of viral and bacterial infections contributing to countless diseases like TB, Viral Gastroenteritis and sometimes even death.

Furthermore, since untreated human excreta is discharged by manual scavengers into the lakes and rivers, global nitrogen cycle gets disturbed as the human excreta is rich in nutrients and after the treatment can serve as an organic compost and therefore can be given to the farmers to enrich the soil.

This theory of reusing and recycling of night soil was envisioned by Mahatma Gandhi. He quoted the term ‘Golden Manure’ and emphasized on the significance of its nutrient rich status and growth promoting factors in the Agricultural Industry. He also realized the potential of night soil to generate biogas and the energy ultimately. Therefore the management of night soil was top priority by Mahatma Gandhi to maintain environmental sustainability.

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<sup>11</sup>Darokar, Shaileshkumar; Beck, H; Socioeconomic Status of Scavengers Engaged in the Practice of Manual Scavenging in Maharashtra, TISS Mumbai Research Study.

<sup>12</sup> Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai

## 8 . LIVING EXPERIENCE:

Exploring and understanding the text led us to explore, through direct observation and interaction the life and experiences of a Scavenger. For this research, we personally interviewed Rama (name changed to protect identity), a 40year old man, who has been cleaning the drains and gutters from last 20-30 years. Being a Valmiki, this work came naturally to him because Valmiki caste is collecting excreta since centuries. He lives in a slum in Rohini and is the only earning member in his family, that comprise of... Rs 7000-8000 . He said and I quote “Pet bharn ke liye ye kamm karna padta hai”(To fill our stomachs ,we need to do this work ). He earns Rs 7000-8000 a month after working for 7-8 hours in a day. He has never used gloves and sometimes even goes inside the gutter , and picks the waste with his hands . “Chooth bhi lagt ahai” ( we even get hurt while doing this) By this , he referred to them falling down while getting into the gutter . Lastly, he said that the waste also releases gases which is harmful for them and with tears in his eyes he recalled how two of his friends cleaning the gutter near M2K Rohini died the previous month because of the exposure to these gases . This still hasn't led him to discontinue the same work. He has only one child and wants him to the job of barber .and never take up this job .

## 9. WHY DOES THE PROBLEM STILL PERSIST?

M.K. Gandhi raised the issue of the horrible working and social conditions of these manual scavengers more than 100 years ago at the 1901 Congress session.<sup>13</sup> He called manual scavenging a “national shame” in the same year. Yet, it took about 90 years for the country to enact a uniform law abolishing manual scavenging. Manual Scavenging is historically linked to the practice of untouchability and continuation of such practices is forbidden under the Constitution of India (Article 17).

**The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines(Prohibition) Act,1993** prohibits the construction or maintenance of dry latrines. However, it has not seen a single conviction in 24 years that it has been in force. A

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<sup>13</sup>Kuksal Sunil, “Manual Scavenging: Nation's Shame”, [Combat Law](http://www.combatalaw.com) ,18 December (2007) available at <http://www.countercurrents.org/kuksal181207.htm>

new bill was drafted in 2012 with a view to make the law regulating manual scavengers more effective. It was passed by both Houses of the Parliament on September 7, 2013 as The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. Its main objectives are:

- Prohibition of employment as manual scavengers
- Rehabilitation of manual scavengers

Insanitary Latrines and open drains or pits into which human excreta is disposed are included in the definition of manual scavenger under 2(g) of the Act. However, water flush latrines in railways that require cleaning by employees are not considered as insanitary latrines, if it is done with the use of protective gear. Employers can be employed on contract or regular basis and hence this definition has a decently wide ambit.

The act also provides for the identification of insanitary latrines by local authorities within their jurisdiction, who must publish the report and give a notice to the occupiers of latrine. The occupiers would be obliged at their own cost, to either demolish them or convert them into sanitary latrines within six months from the date of commencement of the Act. If the occupier failed to do so, the local authority will convert the latrine and recover the cost from the former.

## Gaps in the legislation:

- THE 2013 Act allows the Indian Railways (if they use safety gear and maintain toilets well) to decide when they want to issue the notification on implementing the Act in Indian Railways. As a result The Indian Railways is the major employer of manual scavengers, and manages some of the longest rows of open latrines in the world. The open-hole lavatories in every railway compartment/coach that is in service in the country turns the largest rail network of the world into big lavatory that drops raw human excreta and other waste on rail track and over people and vehicles-where the rail line runs above roads. It is a common scene in every railway station in the country, railway employees cleaning with a broom, railway sleepers coaches covered with human excreta waiting to be cleaned.

- No specific authority is made for rehabilitation. No interim measure till rehabilitation/ alternative employment is secured has been provided.

- It has been made the “duty” of every local authority to use appropriate technological appliances for cleaning. However, no time period, funds or other directive has been made for such transition of methods of cleaning.

## 10. CONCLUSION:

Even today, the implementation of the laws has not been carried out in a proper manner, and has not been able to change the plight of scavengers like Rama.

Mahatma's Gandhi's vision of Clean India was incorporated into the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan when it was instituted on 2 October 2014 . Gandhi's glasses became the symbol and Gandhi's quote 'Cleanliness is Godliness' became the slogan . Nine celebrities were nominated by Prime Minister to take forward the initiative. The gordian knot that was not addresses then and is yet not addressed is - who will clean 1.1 crore to be built under flagship of Swachh Bharat Abhiyan .

The oversight of Gandhis vantage on the liberation of manual scavengers demands acknowledgement today . He fought for the removal of this inhuman practice and devised an environmental perspective in the alternative . Gandhi delved into the the nuances of treating human excreta and promoted reuse and recycling of night soil for the anaerobic digestion to produce biogas as fuel for domestic cooking .

Henceforth in contemporary connotation , to liberate the manual scavengers and to maintain environmental sustainability it is significant that manual scavenging should be replaced by management systems that cautiously collects , transports and treats faecal from pit latrines and Septic tanks . One of the examples is fecal sludge management as the collection , treatment and reuse of excreta constitute the “value chain” of this system thus contributing to the goals of environmental sustainability as ideated by Mahatma Gandhi

.-“Think of that horrible smell that forces you to shut your windows and switch on an AC. Now, magnify that feeling by 100 and you are still not even close”.

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