

Labour file:

Manual Scavengers The Forsaken Lot of Modern India

Even after 71 years of the so-called independent India, the feudal practice of manual scavenging is existent in our 'civilized' and "modern India". Neither the fundamental rights of equality supposed to have granted alike to all citizens of India by the Constitution nor their directive principles nor the banning of manual scavenging in 1953 nor even the recent act of 2013 prohibition of employment as manual scavenging and their rehabilitation act-could bring any betterment in the lives of manual scavengers economically or socially.

The acts made to prohibit the normal scavenging proved to be merely an eye-wash and show-piece acts aimed to hood-wink the external world to show that India too is a civilized modern country and a progressive country.

The normal scavenging of literally carrying the human excreta is existing in rural India as well in certain low-class towns throughout India, more particularly in northern-states.

The manual scavenging in other forms is existing in rural India and in various other forms in urban India. The municipalities, municipal corporations and governmental institutions like Indian railways are employing manual scavenges to attend scavenging works of menial nature and hazardous nature.

Manual scavengers are the worst exploited and down-trodden workers in India rejected of their human dignity.

Neither in the present days of 'Ache Din' and 'Swatcha Bharat' being grandly touted by the NDA rulers, nor strictures made by the Supreme Court could bring any up-lift in the economic and social life of these manual scavengers.

Added to this every day we are witnessing more and more deaths of manual scavengers while cleaning drainages in cities and towns of our country. Despite the provisions of 2013 act prohibit "individuals, local authority or agency in engaging or employing for hazardous cleaning of sewers and septic tanks" the semi-governmental institutions like municipalities and railway are engaging them through contractors, disregarding the law-with that they are not only evading from their statutory responsibility of paying the scavengers with minimum-wages specified by the government but also are avoiding to attend to the safety of workers and providing safety gear to workers engaged in hazardous work of cleaning sewers and septic tanks. No attention what even is paid for the safety of these manual scavenging (sanitation) workers and their lives are taken away simply for maintaining the so-called civilized world. More and more incidents are being reported of workers dying in septic tanks and drainage cleaning though the municipalities, corporation and railways are the 'principal employers' of these manual scavenging and sanitation workers who are responsive for payment of statutory wages, safety and payment of lawful compensation in case of work-place deaths, they are simply evading their statutory responsibility by saying that they would take action against contractors, who are responsible to it- which they never do. This is nothing but will full culpable negligence on the part of the 'principal employers' who have out sourced the works through contractors, and they must be severely punished.

According a recent report prepared by the National Commission of Safari Karma-charies (NCSK), in a period of each five days a Safari Karmachari-Worker(manual scavenger) is being killed in India, while cleaning drainages or septic tank. But in reality the number of deaths of these workers is far more than mentioned in the report. Very rarely those who killed in this manual scavenging work are being paid with statutory compensation payable to be them.

Even the society do not pay required attention to the plight of these manual scavengers. The traditional trade union centers have failed long back in taking up the cause of the manual scavengers seriously and abandoned them. Another sad reality is that even though there are umpteen dalit organizations to represent the interests of the down trodden dalits, these organizations seldom take up the cause of manual scavengers, who are dalits suffering with utmost poverty indignity and the worst oppressed of the society. Thus they are left to the pity and charity of some NGOs for taking up their cause.

The governmental institutions like the Safari Karmacharies Finance and development corporations are practically of no help for the manual scavengers in looking after their welfare.

The irony is the 'survey' under taken by the central government 'task force' couldn't estimate the number of manual scavengers existing in India as on today, and the survey is proved to be a mere farce. Almost such 'surveys' were conducted for 26 years without proper and correct estimation of the

number of manual scavengers languishing in India. It is claimed that the state governments are not cooperating in the surveys today the fact of the existence of manual scavenging and that they have failed in implementing the law and rehabilitation of the manual scavengers.

The task force intended to survey merely by holding one or two camps in each district and asking the manual scavengers to register them-selves (self registration camps), which is not at all a proper method for a true survey. It has been a reality that in many cases, the manual cases found it difficult to pay for their conveyance to the survey camps situated at far off places and unable to register themselves. Moreover according to NGO's there were reports of people(manual scavengers) coming to submit the forms of self-registration have been turned away by the district officials.

Such has been the callous attitude of the administration; and the ruling governments with regards to the scourge of manual scavenging persistently existing in India and about the uplift of economic and social lives of manual scavengers.

That "the governments do not even want to acknowledge the existence of manual scavengers, let alone care for their welfare" has been rightly commented by Ankur Singh of participatory research in India. Yes!. The manual scave-ngers are the forsaken lot of modern India!
