

The Shameful Practice of Manual Scavenging and the Farce of Mechanisation of Manholes!

According to the social justice ministry a total number of 1,035 people have died while cleaning the sewers. The deaths related to cleaning of sewers and septic tanks are more than 10 times to the number of deaths than the announced official figures. The governmental action to avoid the sewage cleaning related deaths is in dismal.

But while introducing the Central budget, a reference was made by the Finance Minister about the need of mechanization of manhole and grandly announced that all cities and towns would switch to 100 percent mechanical dislodging of septic tanks and sewers putting an end to manual scavenging.

Had it been that simple to end manual scavenging, our rulers need not have waited for all these 76 years to do so. The successive governments made various laws, particularly like The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 banning manual scavenging and again prohibition of employment as manual scavengers and their rehabilitation Act was enacted by UPA government, 2013.

Despite these acts no change has occurred. Manual scavenging is continuing not only in rural India, but also in urban India in various forms.

Manual scavenging is not simply a problem that is related to mechanization or non-mechanisation of sewage and septic tank cleaning. No doubt mechanization may provide some relief to the manual scavengers in terms of fatality connected to manual scavenging of manholes, and septic tanks. But at the most the mechanization of manhole will benefit the mechanization equipment manufactures and their trade, besides satisfying the avarice of the corrupted municipality officials who procure such equipment. On the other hand, the onus for manual scavenging related deaths of scavenging workers is being transferred to the victim manual scavengers; as if they had defied the law by not wearing protecting gear and protective mechanical equipment while cleaning the manholes and septic tanks derelicting their duties.

Very recently 'The Hindu' had exposed how the "sanitation workers of Dharmapuri district of Tamil Nadu pickup of human excreta daily due to caste bias and administrative corruption, and when exposed the administration is threatening the very manual scavengers who are made to pick up human excreta daily, that they will punish the workers for manual scavenging, as the workers have taken up the job on their own.

The manual scavenging is an age old, "polluting" occupation imposed by the feudal caste-graded social order on the lower caste dalits, which is still continuing in our present

day semi-feudal system with impunity. Continuance of manual scavenging – the shameful practice – is the reality of the day.

Instead of condemning this inhuman and heinous practice imposed on dalits by the society, Prime Minister Modi, by describing manual scavenging as a “spiritual experience” and “worshipping” sanitary workers at Kumbha Mela in Prayagraj in 2019, has not only theosophised the scavenging occupation (manual) that suits to his Hindutva-Manu doctrine and theory, but also provided governmental justification for continuing the shameful, inhuman and heinous practice imposed on dalits – particularly the scavenging caste that is the lowest rung of caste hierarchy. This is the root cause of manual scavenging that is embedded in the very foundations of our semi-feudal system.

Neither the neo-liberal capitalist economic policies that are being implemented with zeal could bring out any change in the lives of manual scavengers in providing them a dignified and respected occupation but on the contrary due to the employment methods and systems like outsourcing, contractualisation and casualisation of jobs, made the manual scavenging workers more and more vulnerable. The ever increasing unemployment has been forcing these oppressed workers to remain in the occupation of manual scavenging and the youth from these castes to choose the occupation of manual scavenging to eke out a livelihood due to lack of availability of any alternative employment for sustenance.

The governments and rulers who are enacting the laws do not bother to implement them. They do not sincerely make attempts to provide a dignified and respectful rehabilitation to manual scavengers.

Due to outsourcing of services like sanitation and scavenging works, the manual scavengers are made much more vulnerable to the heinous exploitation of contractors. Though the manual scavengers work on a permanent, regular work, they are paid on daily wages without any social security or legal rights to protect them.

Though we are living in highly developed technological age of ultra modernity, the mindset of the people in the society against dalits and scavenging caste workers has not at all changed and either directly or indirectly are being treated as untouchables and as people who are polluted. Despite this social stigma, these manual scavenging workers deprived of all their social, political, moral entitlement are still forced to choose the manual scavenging jobs with no other option.

Very often in cities we witness the youth of the scavenging castes, everyday shouting that they would clean lavatories, septic tanks, sewage pipes, drains etc, carrying long bamboo strips along with them. Thus, they are forced to earn their livelihood in our independent, democratic India, with the only right to sell themselves into servitude of performing the ‘polluting’ job of manual scavenging and make our lives comfortable.

As per official data 45% of the population is still without sewage facilities. The majority toilets in our country, nearly 60% are not linked to sewer lines and their septic tanks require

manual cleaning. Moreover, machanisation needs a huge quantity of water and the related infrastructure which are scarce and unavailable.

In such conditions, this so-called mechanization of manholes will not end manual scavenging but proves to be a farce!