

Scavenging for the State

Manual Scavenging in Civic Municipalities

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A study of sewage workers and toilet cleaners employed with the Pune Municipal Corporation shows how solid waste management is narrowly focused on dry latrine cleaning. One needs to urgently reform solid waste management system and improve the working conditions of people who are employed in cleaning our cities.

There are about 1.8 lakh households across India still engaged in manual scavenging, according to the Socio Economic and Caste Census 2011. Maharashtra has the highest number of manual scavengers at 63713.

The census defines manual scavenger as someone who cleans a dry latrine or carries human waste to dispose it off. This [definition, like much of the discourse on manual scavenging in India, is centred upon dry latrine cleaning](#) (Government of India 2014).

Even the [Safai Karmachari Andolan \(SKA\)](#), one of the largest organisations campaigning against manual scavenging in India, gives primacy to dry latrine prohibition followed by septic tank cleaning. Though the SKA has made important interventions and argued for a broader definition of manual scavenging in the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013, it may not have worked in reality. Local body authorities, non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and even the United Nations (UN) still associate manual scavenging with dry latrines and open defecation.

This leaves out the mechanisms and practices of waste disposal and manual scavenging in civic municipalities where dry latrines do not exist. Therefore it is important to investigate the condition of sewage workers in urban municipalities in India—particularly in Maharashtra. This piece presents the findings of a survey conducted in 2015 for 1091 workers (sewage cleaners and toilet cleaners) of the Pune Municipal Corporation.

The study^[i] found that government agencies or contracts under government agencies are the largest beneficiaries of manual scavenging. Though the case of the Pune Municipal

Corporation (PMC) was taken up for the study, the purpose was not to take one particular city corporation to task, as these conditions prevail in most corporations.

The case study of PMC was taken to stress that [if the third best functioning corporation in the country](#) (Press Trust of India 2011) cannot ensure eradication of manual scavengers and better working conditions for sewage workers, then the situation in the rest of the country could be worse.

Working Conditions

The workers were asked about the process of cleaning waste. They were also asked whether they came into direct contact with human excreta or not. Most of the sewage workers said that they come into direct contact with human waste during the course of their work. Some of them said that they have even cleaned manual waste with bare hands though most of the workers use basic equipment like spade and baskets allotted for these tasks.

When we visited a choked sewage at Ashoknagar in the Yerwada slum area we saw how the workers struggled for two hours to find the blockage. When they finally opened the blocked sewage, they discovered that it was a large mass of human excreta, which had blocked the sewerage line. The workers had to clean the waste with help of a rod, but not without using their bare hands substantially. They said they were lucky that the waste had floated and accumulated at the mouth of the sewage manhole, otherwise they would have to descend into the hole to remove it.

The workers were also asked which of the 44 mandatory protective equipments they were provided and which ones they used. We realised that even when some safety measures such as soap or gloves are given, very few actually use them. It was the poor quality of the equipment provided that deterred most of the workers from using it.

For example, the soaps that were bought by the municipal corporation at an exorbitant price were of extremely poor quality. The workers' union had also staged an agitation protesting the purchase of such substandard soaps. One worker said that he had hurt himself after a rod slipped from his hand because the gloves provided by the corporation were too large and inflexible for the nature of his work.

Lack of Training

In what is a categorical violation of the 2013 Act, most of the sewage workers have not received any form of training regarding their work whatsoever. Even in case of the few respondents who said they have received training, the training is informal. This is in clear contravention of the Central Government Notification on Rules and Obligations to the 2013 Act [\[ii\]](#).

Some of the workers are exclusively engaged in cleaning of round chambers. This involves

cleaning of chambers that have a depth of anything between 6 ft to 14 ft. Most of the workers said they have to enter sewers on a regular basis thus proving that the government's claims that these processes have been mechanised are untrue. There are strict provisions in the act to not allow persons to enter the sewer manually even with protective gear and safety devices.

The rules also specify that there should be a minimum of three employees present during sewage cleaning, one of whom should be a supervisor. The workers said that they were occasionally accompanied by a co-worker and a supervisor but most of the time had to perform the tasks unsupervised.

There are also detailed rules about the procedure to be followed before opening the drainage network. The rules are clear that the atmosphere within the confined space should be tested for oxygen deficiency and toxic and combustible gases including but not limited to poisonous gases.

Not only are these rules not followed, but workers do not even know that such procedures are required. The rules state that workers should test if the chamber is full of inflammable or harmful gas by holding a lead acetate paper. In reality, most workers just hold a lighted matchstick at the mouth of the sewer to confirm the presence of combustible gases.

Toilet Cleaners

Toilet cleaners were the next category of workers amongst whom the survey found the highest incidence of manual scavenging. Apart from the 436 toilet cleaners working with the PMC on both permanent and contractual basis, 69 workers from Sulabh Shauchalayas across Pune and 95 workers from Sassoon General Hospital and College of Nursing, Pune were also interviewed. The workers from medical facilities were included because dealing with biomedical waste can be relatively more dangerous and required specialised training, procedure and equipment.

The survey asked similar questions to toilet cleaners and inspected their conditions of work. It was found that most of the toilet cleaners working with the PMC come in contact with manual waste. In a few cases they used specialised equipment provided to them by the municipal corporation.

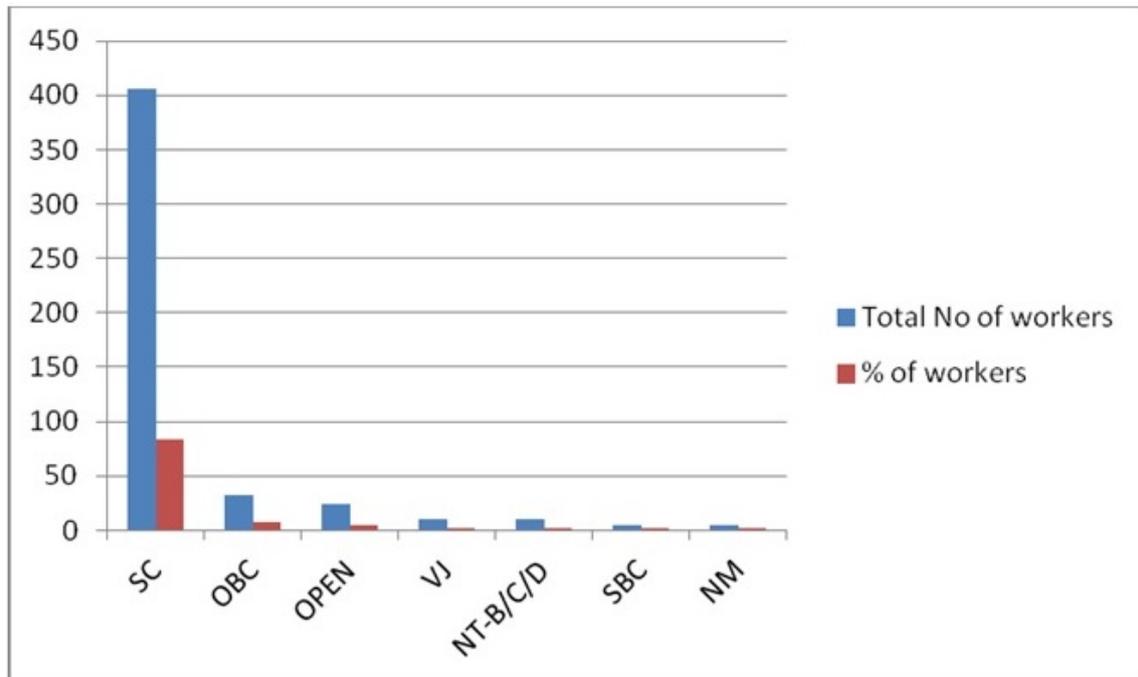


Figure 1: Category-wise distribution of sewage workers in PMC.

Role of Caste

The toilet cleaners suffer humiliation not just at their place of work but also where they stayed. Rajesh Santu, 36-year-old man from the Valmiki caste lived in the Pashan Kothi area of Pune. He had been working as a toiler cleaner for the last 10 years and has been made the caretaker for the Sulabh Shouchalaya in his area. This meant that he had also received a house above the toilet complex.

He receives no salary or equipment for cleaning and is supposed to collect money from the residents of the slum. The slum dwellers think they are under no obligation to pay Rajesh as he has been given a free house above the toilet. At times brawls among drunk men spill onto his house as they fail to make a distinction between the toilet and Rajesh's house in an inebriated state. He himself is an alcoholic and blames the work for his addiction. The family is treated as untouchables, have no social life in the slum and verbal abuses are a regular affair.

People from the slum often defecate in front of his house. He thinks that could be because the people are trying to teach him a lesson but it's also true that the slum is over populated. Most of the times water supply is erratic—the stench in the toilet as well as his house above it is unbearable. The only thing that motivates him to work every day he says is the future of his daughters.

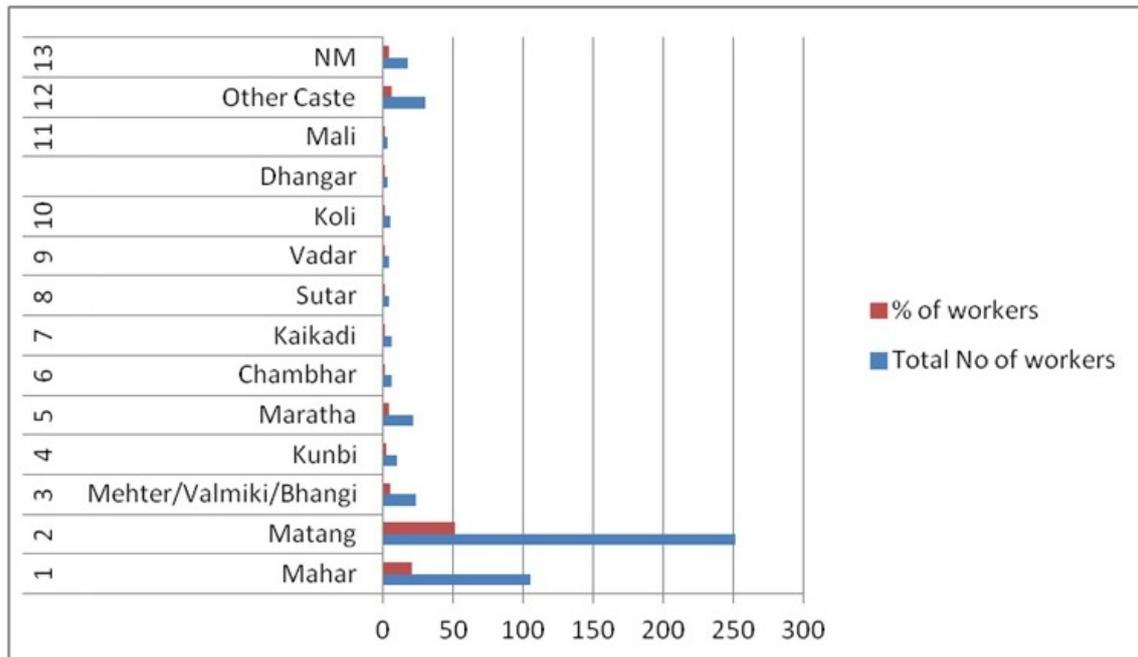


Figure 2: Caste-wise distribution of sewage workers in PMC.

Involvement of Family

Most of the toilet cleaners and sewage workers employed with the municipal corporation were from the scheduled castes, predominantly Valmikis, Mehtars and Bhangis. This also led the government to employ people only from these castes for manual scavenging. The ones who had received jobs under the “open” (general) category were largely from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

Most of workers who were surveyed said that there were from a family that was traditionally involved in manual scavenging. This is almost institutionalised as a system called *varsa hakka* or hereditary right system which the class IV workers can avail. Under this system an employee can get his or her offspring/close relative appointed in their own place in case of retirement or injury. Though there is a provision that if the dependant is educated he or she may be appointed to higher posts such as *mukkadam*, peon, and clerk etc, in reality most children of these workers take up the profession of their parents.

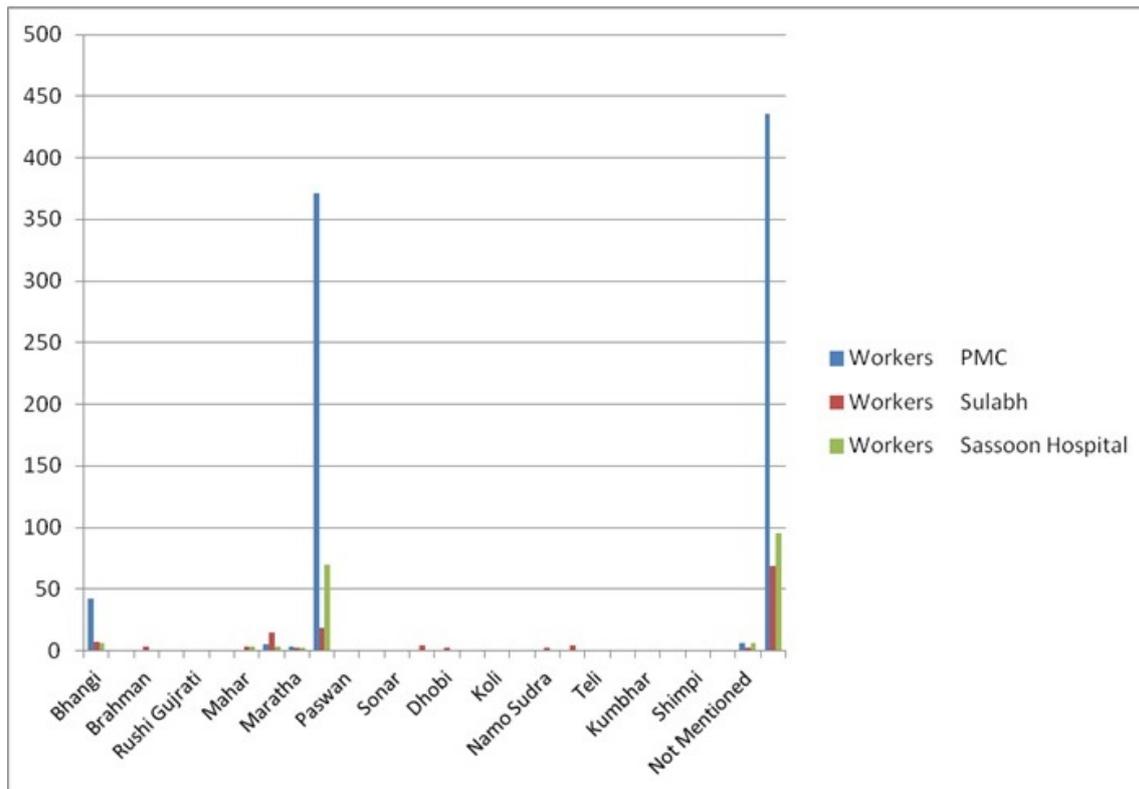


Figure 3: Caste-wise distribution of toilet cleaners in PMC.

Way Forward

It is clear that manual scavenging is an everyday reality of civic municipalities. The problem of sole insistence on the abolition of dry latrines and open defecation however is a mere symptom of a larger malaise. If these derogatory practices are to be abolished only to be replaced by equally dehumanising and, at the same time, legalised systems of manual scavenging then the cause is already lost.

The larger goal should be to identify and accept loopholes in the state's approach towards the management of solid waste produced in cities from its very inception. This state of permanent exception is the accepted norm necessary for our "normal" civic life to run by making permissible manual scavenging under the agencies of the state. No amount of new toilets we manage to build can create a Swaccha Bharat unless the state agencies themselves reform the way they imagine the sphere of human solid waste management and the work remains relegated to certain caste groups that continue to remain pools from which manual scavengers are drawn generations after generations.

The first step in the direction is identifying manual scavenging even outside the sites where dry latrines exist. This means a strict adherence to the definition of the 2013 Act, scrutiny mechanisms for the way municipalities work, arresting contractualisation, rehabilitation and

special assistance to children of these workers. In the long run the talk about smart cities must imply smart not only in terms of concrete sky scrapings above the ground but also smarter and humane systems below it; through which our waste runs.

Notes

[i] The survey for 491 sewage cleaners and 600 toilet cleaners was conducted from 25 May 2015 to 23 June 2015 in all 14 wards of the Pune Municipal Corporation by a team of 20 trained investigators under the supervision of 5 research officers of the institute. The survey was conducted across 161 *kothis* (primary work units of PMC) and personal interviews were conducted for all 1091 workers.

[ii] The Central Government Notification on Rules and Obligations to the 2013 Act, Chapter-II Obligations of Employer towards Employees engaged in the cleaning of Sewer or Septic tank dated 12th December, 2013 says “All employees who are present on-site during cleaning work are given training and adequately familiarised with the knowledge to operate all equipment involved in cleaning work, to avoid injuries or diseases associated with such work and to take necessary steps in case of emergency arising at the place of work and the training shall be conducted every two years and the employees shall be familiarised with any changes in method and technique with respect to the above.”

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