The Complexities of Liberation from Caste Manual Scavenging in Maharashtra

This paper engages with the multidimensional nature and extent of manual scavenging in Maharashtra, primarily focusing on the social groups involved in this inhuman occupation. Being part of a statewide study on the practice of manual scavenging, it attempts to unravel different forms of this caste-based occupation. It follows up with a critical analysis of the role of the state towards the abolition of the said practice and touches on varied aspects of the complexities of rehabilitation premised around a comparative frame, namely the prevailing scenario at the national level. Laced throughout with theoretical implications on this subject domain, the paper concludes with specific insights and practice propositions drawn from the study on varied dimensions related to manual scavenging.

India’s vast occupational diversity is framed around socio-historical categories and deeply embedded layers bounded by hierarchal social systems, such as skilled/unskilled, purity/pollution, stigmatised/dignified, touchable/untouchable that keep reproducing themselves in various socio-economic spheres to this very day. Humiliating occupation like manual scavenging are caste-based and religiously sanctioned either by tradition, birth or descent. Those who are boxed into these occupations are often brutally subjected to social exclusion whilst persistently having to bear the added burden and brunt of an all-pervasive socio-psychological humiliation.

Out of the multiple, often dehumanising caste occupations leaving people lingering half living–half dead in society’s periphery and keeping them perennially dependent on dominant caste groups, the scavenging communities remain by any measure the most unfairly included and socially deprived. Occupying the lowest position in the caste hierarchy, they are, without any doubt, the most marginalised within the marginalised caste communities in Indian society.

Manual scavenging is caste-based hereditary occupation and predominantly linked with forced labour. It involves physical and manual removal of human excreta from dry latrines and sewers (using basic tools such as thin boards, buckets and baskets lined with sacking) and then having to carry the collected excreta on their heads for disposal.

In India and other caste-affected countries within South Asia, the term scavenger is being considered “untouchable” or “polluting” to other higher ups in the ascending order of castes. Such is the undignified nature and conditions of scavenging, that the United Nations Special Rapporteur was forced to note that

the degrading nature of this work is an extreme case and is very much tied up with the inequalities of a deeply ingrained caste system and the lack of choice in finding other types of work.¹

Recent scholarly endeavours attempting to challenge this static nature of the notions of manual scavenging have begun to interrogate aspects such as human dignity or dignity of labour and have raised fundamental questions. They opine that however much the struggle is against the caste-based occupation, the same seems not to be able to make any headway in the light of the complete absence of economic and social equality in India; these characteristics being the predominant nature of Indian society. Barbara Harriss-White (India Working: Essays on Society and Economy), Ashwini Deshpande (The Grammar of Caste: Economic Discrimination in Contemporary...
India and S K Thorat (Blocked by Caste) have shown in their research as to how there is a high concentration of Dalits in menial, unclean and what is called in economic terminology as dead-end jobs, where 90% of such jobs are generally “reserved” for the Dalits.

Construction of Manual Scavenging Communities

Many theorists engaging with the subject of manual scavenging identify old sacred scriptures as the source of the practice. Bindeshwar Pathak (2000) and Gita Ramaswamy (2011) trace the origin of manual scavenging to the Narada Samhita, which mentions the disposal of human excreta as one of the 15 duties assigned to the slaves. Similarly, in Vajasaneyi Samhita, the authors state, “Chandals and Paulkas have been referred to as slaves for the disposal of human excreta.”

Scavengers, sweepers or safai karmacharis as an occupational category are historically known by different caste names in different parts of the country. However, the removers of night soil and the cleaner of latrines belong to well-defined social groups and have been included under the general nomenclature of Bhangi in India today (Shyamlal 1992: 11).

R E Enthoven’s (1920: 105) anthropological accounts of The Tribes and Castes of Bombay suggest that Bhangis were found almost in every district of the Bombay Presidency. However, many resided in Bombay (now Mumbai), Poona (now Pune), Ahmedabad, Surat and Kathiawar. He opines that theories concerning the origin of Bhangi points to broken or outcaste people and as a caste of scavengers and sweepers. They are conceived as the dregs of Hindu society and contain an admixture of outcastes who have fallen to this level, owing to offences against the social code of higher castes. While different Hindu texts identify them as the descendants of a Brahmin sage, the other reference is to them being offsprings of a Shudra father by a Brahmin widow.

It is posited that the term Bhangi is derived from the Sanskrit word Bhanga, meaning hemp, and the habit of Bhanga to take Bhanga (Stephen 1981; Shyamlal 1992; Srivastava 1997). Others trace its meaning to the word broken.

Another common name in usage throughout north India for night-soil removers is “Mehta” meaning “prince” or “leader.” The name, according to Shyamlal (1992: 11), is derived from Persian Mehtar—prince—which may have been applied to ridicule them. Writing on the dynamics of caste among scavengers in Central Provinces, Russel and Lal (1916) note that the Mehtar were the sweeper caste in the Central Provinces that were made up of diverse elements. They pointed out that the Ghasia, Mahar and Dom castes who also engaged in sweepers’ work are amalgamated with the Mehtars.

Another name in Punjab and Uttar Pradesh is Valmiki. This designation was adopted to supposedly gain some respect as the followers of Valmiki Rishi, the author of the epic Ramayana. The religion is centred around the worship of two saints, Lalbeg or Bale Shah and Balmiki or Valmiki. Russel and Lal (1916: 225–26) point out that Balmiki was originally a low caste hunter called Ratnakar, however, he could not find any animals to hunt and started to rob and kill travelers.

One day he met Brahma and wished to kill him but Brahma convinced him of his sins and directed him to repeat the name of Rama until he is purified of his sins. Ratnakar repeated the words “Ram, Ram” sixty thousand years at the same spot till Brahma returns. Brahma named him as Valmiki (from valmik, an ant-hill) and told him to compose Ramayana in seven parts, containing the deeds and exploits of Rama.

The saint Lalbeg is widely worshipped in Punjab by the sweepers. The religion of Lalbegis appear to resemble that of the Kabirpanthis and other reforming sects. The objective is to acquire a status that may elevate them from the utter degradation of their caste (Russel and Lal 1916: 226–27).

Scavenging Communities during Mughal and Colonial Rule

In Punjab, the scavengers are known as Chuhra, derived from their work of chura jharna (to sweep scraps). The real construction of identity and its contestation began in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. For instance, Chuhra, the untouchable caste, used multiple strategies to seek freedom from subjugation. The Chuhras were reported as both the scavengers and agriculturists in British records (Prashad 2000: 28). Vijay Prashad further expounds that in the last decades of the 19th century, the Chamars and Chuhra had lost access to customary rights and could not be retained as village servants (Prashad 2000: 33). The Chuhra community, in particular, attempted two paths for their liberation: conversion to Christianity and migration to cities. Christians in Punjab, during this period, increased by 400%, mostly among the Chuhras who migrated to cities, such as Delhi, Shimla, Jalandar, Amritsar, and Lahore. The statutory identification of Chuhra with sanitation as sweepers was evident during the colonial period. They migrated as workers, but remained sweepers through their services.

During the 1931 Census, J H Hutton clubbed the Bhangi, Chuhra, Halalkhors, Mehtars and Lalbegi under “Scavengers.” They inhabited different provinces and presidencies of British India. N R Malkani (1965) observes that “urban scavenging has resulted in the creation of a Bhangi Caste which is untouchable, unseeable and unapproachable.” Augmenting his argument, he states “The Bhangi is essentially a recent product of urban life, first created as an occupation by Moslems and later in British rule made into a hereditary caste.” Ramaswamy (2011) also makes similar observation, emphasising that manual scavenging expanded phenomenally under the British rule, particularly in the mid-18th century that marked the beginning of industrialisation and urbanisation in the subcontinent. Enthoven (1920) confirmed the above arguments, noting that many Bhangis in the northern part of the Presidency appear to be immigrants from the United Provinces. It seems probable that in many cases Bhangis originally came to this Presidency as camp followers with the armies from the north.

Pertaining to the historical concretising of separate caste, Srivastava (1997: 17–18) asserts that others feel that the practice of sweeping and scavenging disposal of human excreta by humans entered India with the advent of Muslims (Mughals). It is stated that the system of bucket privies was designed and constructed during the Mughal era for their women in

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purdah (veil) as they were not allowed to go in the open for defection, and thus, the war captives were forced to clean the bucket privies. These captives were not accepted into their own caste of origin and by the larger society and thus formed a separate caste.

Another dimension brought into the debates was posited by Russel and Lal (1916: 76) who state that

It can only be definitely shown in a few instances that the existing impure occupational castes were directly derived from the indigeneous tribes. The Chamar and Kori, and the Chuhra and Bhangi, or sweepers and scavengers of the Punjab and United Provinces, are purely occupational castes and their original tribal affinities have entirely disappeared.

Conservative perspective: The whole attempt by the conservatives was to portray Muslims as villains and Hindus as saviours of the Dalits, while also avoiding subdivisions and disunity among Hindus.

The Arya Samaj founded by Dayanand Saraswati underlined the linguistic and racial purity of the Aryans and described the Samaj as a society of the Aryan race (upper castes). The Dalits were excluded from this, but were later offered to improve their caste status through shuddhi or purification (Thapar 2008: 40–41). Similarly, different factions such as the All Indian Achetuddhar Committee, Shraddhananda Dalitudhar Sabha began working for spiritual well-being, religious protection and socio-economic upliftment of the depressed classes. Thus, the attempts by the Hindu organisations were fundamentally political, but under the guise of religion. By the 1920s, the attempts by the Hindu organisations were fundamentally political, but under the guise of religion. By the 1920s, the Arya Samajis, Adi-Dharma, etc. They argued that the Dalits were the original inhabitants of this land and were conquered by the Aryans who enslaved the Dalits. The ad-dharmis in Punjab under the leadership of Mangoo Ram protested against the attempt of Arya Samajis to retain them as Hindus and asserted against them (Omvedt 1994; Mani 2005; Prashad 2000).

In the 1930s, B R Ambedkar clashed with M K Gandhi and his Congress over the separate electorate for Dalits. The ad-dharmi Mandal and Balmiki Sabha (Chuhras) of Jalandhar sent their signature in blood to London in support of Ambedkar as their leader and affirmed his statement that Dalits were a separate entity cast out by Hindu society (Prashad 2000: 87).

Reformist perspective: The Chuhras began to call themselves Valmikis and by the 1930s had conflicts with Chamars over the caste heritage. The Chamars were the followers of Ravidas, while the Chuhras claimed Valmiki as their guru. The clash was around the status and precedence of the guru (Prashad 2000: 90). These differences were cashed upon by the Arya Samajis to win over the Chuhras to Hinduism. Valmiki Prakash written by Ami Chand in 1936 became a staple track of the Balmiki community. The track highlighted conversation between Ram Sevak and Balmiki man and carried sustained attacks on the ad-dharmi movement and their leaders who were accused of separating the Dalits from the Hindus. It was enforced upon the Chuhras that Brahmins did not allow others to read the Vedas, whereas Ramayana was open for all, from Brahmins to Chandalas, and hence, Valmiki was chosen as a guru by the community. Even Thakkar and Harijan Sevak Sangh were involved in this politics (Prashad 2000: 92–93). Thus, some Dalits succumbed to Arya Samajis and their political manipulation of the situation.

Prashad (2000: 87–88) noted that in a meeting of Dalits and Arya Samaj, the Arya Samaj upadeshak (missionary) sought pardon from Dalits and sought friendship with them. This meeting was presided over by Mangoo Ram at Shimla. In response, the Dalits asserted that they would not be swayed by hollow promises and occasional dramatics. In response, N L Varma, an Arya Samaj follower, said that he carried refuse from the latrines before the meeting, to which Chunni Lal, one of the ad-dharmi Dalit retorted, stating “he cannot accomplish the work fully well unless he does it for at least 10 or 15 days.”

The recent campaign on Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) is the classic example for the reproduction of such an attitude within the reformist framework. While paying no heed to the “rights of being” of the traditional sanitation workers (safai karmacharis), technicalities of sanitation are instead given priority, plus the health of workers being noted as an important component within its framework. In the perspective of the SBA, more toilets equals cleanliness and more healthy workers equals clean India. Prashad, in as late as 1998, calls such approaches reformist, where a policy is posited in such strategic ways as to make the inhuman and poor working conditions of the scavengers/safai karmacharis more tolerable rather than destroying the very system that generates it.

Abolitionist perspective: Ambedkar, however, has a different position pertaining to the same. His was a more fundamental argument that points out to the basis of social life itself, rather than drawing the same conclusions as the aforementioned authors. His arguments, often observed in tumultuous debates with Gandhi who he viewed as a mere reformist, asserted,

You (Gandhi) appeal to the scavenger’s pride and vanity in order to induce him and him only to keep on to scavenging by telling him that scavenging is a noble profession and that he need not be ashamed of it. (Ambedkar 1990a: 292–93)

Yet, such glorification of manual scavenging was inhuman, unfounded and, not to say the least, laced with lethal repercussions. Reformism, in the perspective of Ambedkar, was nothing more than a sanitised conception of sanitation itself, strategically framed to obscure the controversial nature of manual scavenging and the very problematics of untouchability.

Bhagwan Das (1996: 10), in his seminal work Main Bhangi Hun reiterates this argument that

From the primitive time, I am the original inhabitant of Bharat land and did not accept the slavery and fought against the invaders. I did not bow down before the kings and Purohits nor did I worship their gods. I am part of the social group that safeguarded this freedom of the natives. My story starts from that day when the Aryan kings attacked the pious country like Bharat and made us slaves by removing crown from my head and forced upon my head the basket of refuse.
The abolitionist perspective challenges the confinement of scavengers in a system in which institutionalised inequality is legitimised by religious scriptures and whose fundamental informing principles are premised on the forms of reciprocal repulsion. The perspective instead presents struggle and resistance against manual scavenging as a means out of historical degradation and caste subjugation.

Profile of Castes Engaged in Manual Scavenging

The Government of Maharashtra in 2005 sanctioned a research project to study the prevalence, extent and nature of practice of manual scavenging in the state, under the Mahatma Phule Backward Class Development Corporation (MPBCDC). The data presented in this paper is based on a study carried out by the author under the aegis of the Tata Institute of Social Sciences. The study covered all the districts and talukas, urban local bodies (ULBs) (municipal corporations, municipal councils) and places whose population is 10,000 and above. Aiming to ascertain the numbers of dry latrines and manual scavengers, the study covered 2,753 households identified as engaging in manual scavenging with 4,182 individuals who are directly involved in different forms of manual scavenging.

The scavengers in Maharashtra are known as the Mehtar, Bhangi, Balmiki, Rukhi, Lalbegi in local and regional languages and, as aswaccha (unclean) safai kamgars or manual scavengers into a bureaucratic parlance. Of the total 59 castes listed as Scheduled Castes (SCs) by the Census of Maharashtra, Mahar (Neo-Buddhists), Mang/Matang, Bhamhi (Chambhar/Chamar) and Bhangi, these four together constitute almost 92% of the total SC population in the state.2 Mahars are numerically the largest SC with 57.5%, followed by Mang/Matang 20.3% and Bhambi (Chambhar) 12.5% of the SC population of the state, whereas the Bhangis with nearly 2% (1,86,776) are the fourth largest SC population of the state. Under the entry “Bhangi” there are 10 subgroups. They are namely—Bhangi, Mehtars, Olgana, Rukhi, Malkana, Halalkhor, Lalbegi, Balmiki, Korar and Zadmalli (the Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders [Amendment] Act, 1976, provided by the Registrar General of India.) The population of Bhangi is highly urbanised, accounting for nearly 92.7% in the said area. They are employed by both public and private/informal sectors in the state, such as the cantonment boards, municipal corporations, municipal councils, railways, airports, government/private hospitals, private housing societies/chawls and commercial establishments. The members of these castes are traditionally known as untouchables or outcastes and form the lowest stratum of the society. Their traditional occupations revolve specifically around the removal of dead animals, handling dead bodies on funeral ground, drum beating, cleaning/sweeping road/lanes in villages/towns and the manual removal and cleaning of human excreta.

Unlike other SCs, such as the Mahar (Neo-Buddhists), Mang/Matang and Chambhar, Bhangis, being a moving population were not the part of traditional Maharashtrian village structure. However, being migrants from various parts of India initially brought by the Britishers, they have settled down in relatively urban areas of the state in the first half of the 20th century.

Demographic Profile and Migration Patterns

In Maharashtra, the untouchable groups (Mahar, Matang, Chambhar, Dhor, etc) had never performed the task of manual removal of human excreta. However, it is believed that during the pre-independence period, the native Muslim–Mehtar or Bhangi was the only (religious) group engaged in manual scavenging. As the British laid the foundation of railways and developed certain areas as cantonment towns (Mumbai, Deolali-Nashik, Ahmednagar, Pune, Aurangabad and Kamte-Nagpur-cantonment towns having military bases), the Bhangi/ Mehtar or Valmiki, especially from northern parts of India, migrated to Maharashtra and to other southern parts of the country and settled in urban and semi-urban trading centres, including these cantonment towns. The Bhangis, Rukhis, Vankars and Meghwals from Gujarat migrated to Mumbai, Pune and Nashik in Maharashtra. All these castes are the migrants from Rajasthan, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat.

According to field observations and data collected through focus group discussions (FGDs), the earliest migration into Maharashtra is that of Gujaratis (Meghwals and Vankars). This first wave of migration dates back to the mid-19th century (the famous Chappania Akal, the famine of 1856) and early 20th century. Meghwals are numerically strong untouchable caste spread all over Gujarat. They were also known as Dhed, Mayavansi and Vankar. They were never traditional scavenging communities, but in the absence of other scavenging castes in some villages they were expected to perform this task also. During the same period, Bombay was rapidly becoming the centre of trading activities of British. With the establishment of “Board of Conservancy” in Bombay in 1845, a process of systematic "solid Waste Management" and recruitment of Scavengers/Halalkhors has begun. Due to close proximity to Bombay, the Meghwals, Vankars and Rukhis who migrated to the city were employed as conservancy workers. They also migrated to nearby cities, such as Nashik, Pune and Aurangabad. Since then, they have settled in the state and are engaged in various forms of scavenging.

Other scavenging communities migrated from North India, especially from Haryana, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Punjab, Delhi and Madhya Pradesh in large numbers. They have significant presence in various cities/towns of Maharashtra. Though they are known by different names in their respective states as Mehtar, Bhangi, Chuhra, however, they prefer to identify themselves as Balmiki/Valmiki and have also been notified as such in states like Maharashtra.

The Valmiki, unlike other untouchable groups, occupied a very low place in a traditional caste hierarchy in their place of origin. They performed the most obnoxious traditional occupation in the historical-caste structure. They were mainly engaged in polluted, inhuman occupations at the landlord’s houses in the village. Being at the bottom of the hierarchy without any access to land, education or any other dignified
occupation, they were made completely dependent on their patron-landlords for their livelihood. As a result, they were subjected to a greater degree of humiliation and subjugation by the caste Hindus. In this context, migration perhaps was a preferred option as a means to escape the caste-based exclusion. Nonetheless, manual scavenging remains largely a caste-based or descent-based occupation even in urban areas and while migration has freed them from the immediate clutches of the landlord, yet, it has not helped them much in ridding themselves of caste-based discrimination.

Zone-wise Concentration by Caste and Category
An important component of the study reveals an important facet of the dimensions of manual scavenging. It was found that not only sc, but other groups such as Scheduled Tribe (st), Denotified Tribe (dnt)/Nomadic Tribe (nt), Other Backward Classes (obc) and General are found engaged in manual scavenging, although their percentage is very low or negligible. Hoping to provide a deeper understanding into the said subject, I present below some data that unravels specific social categories that are engaged in this occupation.

Scheduled Castes: According to the study, of the total identified sample of 2,753, a total of 87.7% belong to scs. Zone wise, the Konkan region accounts for more than one-fourth that is 29.6%, followed by Pune 17.2%, Aurangabad 16.1%, Amravati 13.8%, Nagpur 13.0%, and Nashik standing at 10.1%.

Scheduled Tribes, Denotified and Nomadic Tribes: Among the st/dnt/nt data reveals that only 0.9% st households are found engaged in scavenging. More than half (58.3%) of them are in the Konkan region followed by one-fourth (25.0%) in Amravati. This is perhaps because of their high population in these regions. To be more specific, they belong to the Mahadev Koli, Gond, Kolam and Katakari tribes. Besides these communities, there are a few who may fall into the dnt/nt category such as Kunchi Karve, Bhoi, Kaikadi and Vanjari. The traditional occupation of these st, denotified and nt are not scavenging; however, the likelihood of their own socio-economic marginalisation (conceived as a possible push factor), and the easy access to urban settings and employment opportunities available (conceive as pull factor), can perhaps be accounted as reasons for these communities to join these occupations.

Other Backward Classes: Of the total identified sample, 1.8% of the obcs were found engaged in this occupation. Their presence was more prominent in the Konkan zone (nearly three-fourths). Whereas, their percentage is negligible in other zones. It is important to note that the Konkan division includes Mumbai Metropolitan Region (MMR) and has as many as six municipal corporations. The obcs were mainly absorbed as employees in these ulbs, hospitals and the railways. They come from obcs, such as Teli, Mali, Kunabi, Kumbhar, Sonar and Dhangar. While their traditional occupation was never scavenging, yet, according to the data collected, it was found that significant numbers of people from this category are getting into this occupation and their percentage is slightly high in urban settings, especially in MMR and other big cities. One reason for this could be the cut-throat competition for government jobs among the educated unemployed across the sections. As a result, many Shudra castes falling under the obc category are attracted to such government jobs. Second, the relative accesses for this category into the administration of these institutions entering as a safai kamgar/sweeper could also be a means to finally get absorbed into other (dignified) departments and/or in due course be promoted as supervisor through their political connections and influence.

General category: Of the total identified sample, 9.6% of the awachha safai kamgars/scavengers fall under general category. Within them, 81.5% are Muslims, 0.4% are Christians and 18.1% are Hindus other than sc, st and obc. The important point here is that even the Muslims have been included in the list of general category, which is a controversial issue. As per the Constitution, only Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist religions qualify to be included into the sc list, whereas, Muslim and Christian are not. However, field observations suggest that the Muslims have been performing this occupation since time immemorial, and a majority of them are even more backward than their Hindu counterparts. Another important aspect is that within Muslim–Mehtars, Lalbegi and Sheik are two distinct endogamous groups and intermarriages between these two are not allowed. Among Lalbegi, some are still Hindu and others have embraced Islam. Although they form a most significant part of the underprivileged section of our society, they are still deprived of many government programmes meant for the upliftment of the scavengers.

Among the Hindu general category, people use their political influence at the local level to grab a few posts of safai kamgar generally meant for the communities traditionally performing these occupations. It is observed that the general category persons entering this profession never perform these filthy tasks. They rather prefer to work as supervisors or sanitary inspectors and then try to become clerks or simply sub-contract out their task to somebody else from the scavenging castes. Advance-ment in technology and government measures to completely abolish the dry latrines (at least from urban and semi-urban areas) has brought some positive changes in the nature of this occupation. As a result, persons from general category seem not to mind joining as a safai karmachari and, thus, sweep roads for a few days and then switch over to some other tasks within the same department in due course of time.

Dimensions of Scavenging: Nature, Extent and Form
Manual scavengers in Maharashtra are engaged in five major activities of manual scavenging. “Water-based latrine” from amongst other scavenging activities in Maharashtra is the largest practice of manual scavenging where 43.4% (1,800) of the scavengers are manually cleaning excreta. “Open defecation” (as a part of community toilet block or roadside) is prevalent in 29.80% (1,239) cases. “Open gutters/drains” account for
24.7% (1,025). “Manholes,” which account for 1.5% (63) cases, are prevalent mainly in cities such as Mumbai and Pune. Only in a very few instances of 0.9% (55) “dry latrines/Topli Sandas” are in practice. Incidentally, large share of this belongs to the Aurangabad zone or region, especially the Cantonment area, with 89.09% (49) of the cases.

The nature of manual scavenging has changed over the years. In Maharashtra, the existence of dry latrine/dabba latrine is found only in a few areas of Marathwada region, namely Aurangabad, Jalna and Beed. However, the community/public toilet blocks or the water-based/latrines provided by ULBs in certain localities in semi-urban and urban areas are not adequate and not properly maintained. The practice of defecating in the open, alongside roads, open gutters, drainages, in the open space, and around toilet blocks has been found prevalent. This requires the manual scavenger as an employee of the ULBs or any other government organisation to manually remove/clean and dispose of human excreta and other waste.

The practice of scavenging and employment of manual scavengers by the local government authorities and private households has been banned under the “Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993.” This act was enacted in Maharashtra from 26 January 1997. The act declared the employment of manual scavengers engaged in manually removing human excreta an offence, and thus, banned the construction of dry latrines, advocating in the process the conversion of existing dry latrines into water-seal latrines. The study revealed that only 36% of the respondents are aware about this act. Not a single case is registered under the act till the government brought in a new legislation “Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act” in 2013. This clearly reflects the apathy of the state in the implementation of this act.

Further, as a strategy to eradicate this practice, it is identified as important to liberate and rehabilitate the manual scavengers into other dignified occupations. This resulted in the government launching the “National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers and their Dependents” in March 1992. However, the lukewarm implementation and the complete lack of coordination between the training and the financial organisation under the scheme hardly bore any fruit; instead, it rendered the scavengers unemployed and marginalised them even further. According to the data from the study, only 28% of the respondents are aware, and only 8% have benefitted from this scheme in Maharashtra.

The Indian Scenario: Current Status
Around 60% of all open defecation in the world takes place in India (News 18 2012). To address this problem, the government of India had launched a programme called the Total Sanitation Campaign in 1999. The campaign became only partially successful and was restructured to make it more people-centric and was renamed Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA) with a goal of eradicating the practice of open defecation by 2022. Maharashtra, along with Kerala, Himachal Pradesh and Haryana, is on its way to achieve the goal of open defecation free state in the next two years. However, all such programmes seem to have been unable to effectively tackle the problem of providing adequate sanitation to the masses at large, which is directly responsible for the prevalence of the practice of manual scavenging in the country. The Census of India 2011 data on the type of latrine facility within households reveals that there are over 7.4 lakh households across the country where “night soil is removed by humans.” This does not include the households where “night soil is disposed into open drain” (over 12.33 lakh households) and “night soil is serviced by animals” (over 4.93 lakh) that are most likely to engage manual scavenging services subsequently. About 25 lakh households are still using dry (non-flush) latrines, employing manual scavengers directly or indirectly. Chandigarh, Sikkim, Goa and Lakshadweep are the only regions in the country that do not have a single instance of manual scavenging.

The census figures only throw light on various types of latrines and the modes in which human excreta is removed (by human) or serviced (by animal); however, it does not give the exact numbers of manual scavengers in each state. For the population of manual scavengers, we have to rely on Census 2011 and the data given by various ministries of the central government. According to Annual Report 2009–10, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Government of India, the population of manual scavengers in Maharashtra is 64,785. Of these, 19,086 are rehabilitated and about 45,699 scavengers are yet to be rehabilitated.

The Census of India 2011 data with regard to sanitation facility in Maharashtra is equally important and relevant in this context. Although it does not give exact population of manual scavengers in Maharashtra, however, it does provide the magnitude of the problem of sanitation facility and manual scavenging in the state. Table 1 reveals the condition of sanitation in both rural and urban areas in the state with types of latrines. If viewed carefully, except the latrines connected to “piped water system,” all other types of latrines invariably need

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>State</th>
<th>Total No of Households</th>
<th>% of HHs Having Latrine Facility within Premises</th>
<th>% of HHs Not Having Latrine Facility within the Premise</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra Rural</td>
<td>1,30,16,652</td>
<td>38.00</td>
<td>62.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra Urban</td>
<td>1,08,13,928</td>
<td>53.71</td>
<td>46.29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maharashtra Total</td>
<td>2,38,30,580</td>
<td>53.30</td>
<td>46.70</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1: Sanitation Facility in Maharashtra Rural/Urban, Census of India 2011
to be cleaned/removed and disposed off by humans. In the light of this, the problem of manual scavenging therefore persists.

The population of the set of castes engaged in manual scavenging profession in Maharashtra is highly urbanised (92.7%). With the process of rapid urbanisation in the state, the problem of manual scavenging seems to be more aggravated in urban and semi-urban areas rather than in rural areas where villagers prefer open fields for defecation. The circular issued by the Social Justice and Special Assistance Department, Government of Maharashtra on 4 March 2013 with regard to survey of insanitary latrines reveals that there are 1,71,688 households spread out in 256 towns/cities. The data is based on Census 2011 and mainly includes the statutory towns in Maharashtra.

However, the Census 2011 data on sanitation reveals the challenges that rural Maharashtra has to face. It indicates that only 38% of households in rural Maharashtra have latrine facility within the premises. The remaining 62% households have no latrine facility and, therefore, have to resort to alternative sources, namely using “public latrine” accounting for 10% and “open field” accounting for 90%. The most striking fact that has emerged from this data is that there are 4,291 households where night soil is removed by a human. In addition to this, there are 12,528 households where night soil is serviced by animals. The presence of both these categories, in other words, also suggests an engagement of manual scavengers for cleaning/removing and disposing off human excreta.

Conclusions

Seeking as I do to uncover the prevalence, nature and extent of manual scavenging in Maharashtra, and in the process, complicate and destabilise a historically embedded social notion formulated around an occupation, I consider it imperative to assert that time is ripe for theorising fundamental questions pertaining to the said subject. The urgency felt is much pronounced in the light of a series of promulgation of acts and policies by the state to confront and rid caste-based manual scavenging from India. Having stated the above thought, it is also important to note that however noteworthy the state’s acts and policies, much remains desired in the implementation of the said policies that would directly affect people’s lives. Beginning with the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 and the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 and schemes such as the National Scheme for Liberation and Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers and their Dependents (nslrm), Total Sanitation Campaign (tsc), National Safai Karmachari Finance and Development Corporation, Nirmal Gram Puraskar Yojana, Self-employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers and sba, etc, the acts and programmes of the Government of India, in general, and of different states, in particular, remain nondescript. In many ways, they seem to have miserably failed to eradicate the inhuman practice of cleaning toilets and lifting human excreta by hand assigned mostly to some caste groups.

On this front, one of the arguments which I want to propose is that these occupations have always been caste/descent-based and are performed predominantly by members of Dalit communities. While government officials, politicians and judiciary (predominantly upper caste) have rarely shown any genuine commitment to its eradication beyond loud policy pronouncement when cornered by facts and figures, there is however a perennial denial of its social existence among those who wish to free themselves from the responsibility of their daily excreta produce. Several studies and reports emerging from civil society organisations and institutions have pointed to one single fact—that the governments (central and states) have been the largest employer of manual scavengers and thus remain the biggest perpetrators of this crime. This is often viewed as fundamentally violating basic human rights of these voiceless citizens of the country. In an interesting report by Malakani Committee (1969) in the wake of Gandhi Centenary Year, the Bhangi Kashtha Mukti programme was launched by providing scavengers with wheelbarrows, subsidy to households to convert dry latrines into flush-out latrines, etc. The policy that informed the programme purported to address the issue of indignity, stigma associated with scavenging, and the consequent practice of untouchability against manual scavengers by eradicating insanitary conditions around them. Most of such welfare policies programmes of the state are informed by a belief that the inhuman state of manual scavengers and safai karmacharis are likely due to physical and unhygienic conditions, rather than “sociocultural” or “ritual” impurity imposed on their lives by the caste system.

Slavoj Žižek in his book The Plague of Fantasies, argues that “In everyday life, ideology is at work especially in the apparently innocent reference to pure utility.” He substantiates this by giving the example of toilet construction in three nations, namely United Kingdom, France and Germany and how it reflects the ideology of the nation. Similarly, the toilet system in India is of dry and open toilets. There is no concept of the flush in the Indian system. The inherent ideology of the system is that someone will clean the excreta. The Indian toilet ideology is rooted in the notion of the caste system. This, in turn, informs caste-based occupation and vice versa. Thus, manual scavenging becomes an essential element of the Indian toilet system as it provides labour to clean the excreta and creates a system of social obligation on the person doing the job of manual scavenging.

The state and central governments for a long time were even reluctant to redefine the term “manual scavengers.” This was because they feared the fact that they would have to bring these workers into the ambit of similar forms/practices of work, such as sewerage workers, sanitation workers in railways and hospitals, morgue workers and garbage loaders, who
work in most hazardous and inhuman conditions. Manual scavengers, who risk their life to keep towns and cities clean, are, thus, in turn, constantly denied their fundamental entitlements such as housing, healthcare, education, social and economic security by the state. In fact, in India, even for the larger “civilised” society, such practices are considered as normal occupations and as the Dalits’ social obligations and contribution to the larger society.

Although many leaders have called it a “national shame” and demand for its immediate eradication, unfortunately as it may sound, political parties and civil society alike have rarely shown or considered the issue serious enough to warrant drastic action on the matter. Imbued and deeply rooted in caste, manual scavenging keeps persisting. This is one of the main reasons for the inability to secure any theoretical advancement that can provide superior insights and stimulate change in the said reality. Nonetheless, this should not be the reason for not attempting to raise the debate about manual scavenging to a valid place in both the moral and political discourse.

To finally conclude, the production of factual numbers that unravels the prevalence and extent of manual scavenging is imperative. However, in our context, when we transcend numbers and enter the more complex realm of lived experience, we are confronted in every sphere either by state lethargy, caste arrogance or even people’s wilful acceptance of the said occupation. We live in a society soaked in caste, where societal solidarity is predicated and structured around forms of coercive equilibrium rather than consensual equilibrium. The social attitude that stems from such surreptitious premises often suffers from an epistemic blindness that binds caste groups into rigid silos. In such realities, whilst one has a clear view and perception of oneself, yet, one is blind to the realities of others. The interplay of such conjunctions often manifests more starkly in the public realm of social duties and political responsibilities as citizens. While those higher up in the caste hierarchy consider the production of waste their natural right and privilege, yet, the same caste feels no need to take the responsibility for the waste generated once the same is conceptually transformed into dirt. So pervasive is this coconced attitude among the privileged caste that one’s generated waste is often conceived not as one’s own, but as the responsibility of other castes. The repercussions of such an attitude have been at the heart of the production and reproduction of the practice of untouchability, the essence of which can be articulated as, “Whereas it is my God designed natural duty to produce waste, it is however the religiously ordained responsibility of the untouchable to clean the dirt.” In this context, I opine that unless we address the fundamental mechanics of this basic conception, no policy nor campaign, however liberatory it may purport to seem, can fundamentally alter the lives and livelihoods of manual scavengers.

NOTES
2 http://censusindia.gov.in/Tables_Published/SCSVdsh_se_maha.pdf.

REFERENCES