

# LIBERAL STUDIES

*Vol. 1, Issue 2, July–December 2016*



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***Socio-Economic Challenges of Urban  
Sanitation Workers in Gujarat: An  
Analysis of Ahmedabad City***

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Gujarat is one of the most industrialised states in India and thus attracts people from different parts of the country, both in terms of investment and jobs. This has led to several advantages in the cities in Gujarat and alternatively has also attracted a heavy concentration of population mainly in urban Gujarat. As per figures of slum-dwellers, Gujarat has 2.48 per cent of the total slum population in the country.<sup>1</sup> According to the data of 2011 census, although the number of slums have reduced by 5,579 (1.52 per cent) over the last decade i.e. 3,65,870 in 2001 to 3,60,291 in 2011, big numbers of slums are still non-notified.<sup>2</sup> While Ahmedabad has the second largest slum population in the state, Surat city tops the list.

The rapid growth of migrated population over a short period of time and more work opportunities, with better life style, in the urban areas have resulted in the growth of the urban slum population in the state. Some people who have migrated to cities are very poor and can barely afford rooms, not to mention houses with escalated rents in the urban areas. On the other end of this scenario, slum areas have comparatively lower rents and the migrants have to shell out much less for the room rent or have their own *jhuggies*; this makes the slum areas ideal as areas of residence. However, life here is very miserable in terms of social, economic, educational and health conditions, with disturbingly crowded living conditions, shortage of drainage system, stinking water bodies, heaps of garbage, unhygienic working condition, etc. The garbage is thrown open in their areas and more sordid, the cattle and dogs drag the waste to their houses.<sup>3</sup>

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Similar to other parts of the country, in urban Gujarat, these socially excluded poor people are the marginalised sections; who live in slum areas and are deprived of their basic rights to sanitation. In Ahmedabad, most of the houses in the sanitation-deprived neighbourhoods are built in clusters and on government land, made of mud, wood, bamboo, and plastic sheets often cover the roofs. Most families here, do not have a toilet in their homes or access to running water. They either use a communal toilet or are forced to use open spaces. Especially, the life of women here is deplorable since they have to bear the burden of household work and in the absence of basic facilities, also the burden of fetching and carrying of water, collection of firewood, etc. They have to struggle to maintain household hygiene due to lack of sanitation and poor drainage. Besides, they are also subjected to harassment or assault when using open areas for defecating and insufficient street lighting at night.<sup>4</sup>

### **Working Conditions and Nature of Labour**

Recently, lots of changes have been seen in the process of cleaning and the structure of the sewer system, but the one thing remains unchanged and that is the fate of the sanitation workers. Now, in the city of Ahmedabad there are two types of sewerage workers found; one is manhole workers and the other is municipality road sweepers. While maintenance of the manhole is usually managed by men alone, the cleaning and sweeping of municipality in Ahmedabad is done by both men and women, mostly from the “Valmikis” and other such communities.<sup>5</sup> Instead of cleaning the dry latrines, now they have to go inside the pit to clean the blocked sewers filled with human excreta and other hazardous wastes. They work with bare hands, and expose themselves to all kinds of dirt, pollution and dangerous bacteria. And the working conditions of these sanitary workers have remained virtually unchanged for over a century.

The sanitation workers under the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) have been categorised in to four categories; where some are engaged permanent workers registered with the AMC; some are temporary workers; some are daily wage workers; and some are contract workers and rag pickers. However, The AMC often hires daily wage labourers and unregistered workers instead of the permanent workers. Hence, this creates complicated issues in the fate of this ‘Safai Karamchari’ because the daily wage and contractual labours have no right to claim for any compensation from the AMC in case of serious injuries inside the sewer or in the event of accidents because of the haphazard manner in which the sewer workers are employed. Hence, most of the contract workers are relatively inexperienced and untrained and enter the sewer for emergency cleaning work, as compared with permanent municipal staff.

For this they receive Rs.100 per day.<sup>6</sup> Most of the workers are contractual and have no gratuity, provident fund or any other facilities. Moreover, it has been found that widows who are offered work as compensation, after the death of own people, in most cases, do not receive full wages.<sup>7</sup>

It is also found that the sanitation workers, especially “Bhangis” in Gujarat are forced to clean the dry latrine both in rural and urban, managed by either private or local self governments. Generally, they collect the dung of animals, along with other filth that is scattered all over and dump at a designated place. The excreta of very young babies is also mixed in the collection. The ‘vassida’ (dung) is collected manually into shallow plates made of tin and dumped by the “Bhangis.” The dumping grounds are often near the Bhangi houses. After the dumping is over, the tin plates are cleaned with hands by mixing dry soil to wipe off the sticking content. This is to save the plates from corrosion. In return, some food is given to them daily. At the end of the thrashing season, they are given 10-15 kilos of grain only.<sup>8</sup> This implies that the Bhangi communities are exploited both socially and economically by some unscrupulous upper caste people in Gujarat.

### **Working Environment of the Bhangis**

In Gujarat, the Valmikis (a sub-caste from the Dalit community), labelled as Bhangis (a derogatory term for manual scavengers) have been one of the most excluded, exploited and marginalised groups. The Valmiki community constitutes 2.5 per cent of the total population of Gujarat. According to the social hierarchy among both higher and lower castes, the Bhangis occupy the lowest of the low position as they are night soil remover.<sup>9</sup> The Bhangi community is involved in cleaning sewage drains and manually removing human excreta, besides sweeping roads. Needless to say, that the majority of sanitation workers belong to the Valimiki community.

Prior to independence, these Bhangis were working as sweepers of the higher caste. Now they are being engaged as sanitation workers in Gujarat. At all levels, villages and municipalities, Bhangis are the workers. As they are the sweeper class, they are regarded as polluters of higher caste but paradoxically work for the upper castes. Therefore, the Bhangis live in the residential areas called Bhangivas, separate from the Dharbars, Rajputs, and Vanniyas who constitute the higher caste Hindus in the area. The Bhangis are also employed as manual scavengers. Manjula Pradeep, the director of Navsarjan Trust, a Gujarat-based human rights, who had filed a petition in January 2013 against the practice of manual scavenging in Dholka Town, before the National Human

Rights Commission (HHRC), stated that the condition of people in slums like Dholka is so deplorable that they are deprived of their basic rights. Worst still, where they live there is no water facilities in the toilets; the doors of the toilets are broken and the open drainages are full of human waste and uncollected garbage. Because of the extreme filth, people are defecating in the open space. In spite of the state's Slum Rehabilitation Policy, 2010, pure drinking water, drainage, cooking gas, street light etc. are lacking in the city. A 2014 state-wide study by the government revealed, that 45.4 per cent of Bhangis had no toilets and no bathrooms, their unsanitary living conditions being used to justify their polluted status.<sup>10</sup>

### **Educational Status**

The sanitation workers have a low educational background, and the drop out of their children is high. In Gujarat, 7 per cent of seats in the government and education sectors are reserved for Dalits.<sup>11</sup> There are also established reservation systems in place at the district, block and village levels throughout the state. In spite of all these provisions, according to the report of Navsarjan, a Dalit organisation in Gujarat, the dropout rate from school among children of manual scavengers (in Gujarat) is around 70–80 per cent.<sup>12</sup> Some studies view that the continued practice of discrimination and untouchability towards the Dalits throughout Gujarat affect high dropout rate among the children of Dalits. More to mention, due to low educational background, the Dalit children do not get better job opportunities which ultimately results in poor and low standard of living. They also get very less wage.

### **Caste Based Discrimination and Occupational Health Hazard**

In spite of recognition by the international agencies' of 'right to health' and the Indian Constitutional provision of 'right to life and liberty' (Article 21), the right to health is not available to all citizens of India.<sup>13</sup> In spite of the constitutional and statutory provisions designed to guarantee their right to dignity and equality the Dalits are still continuing to live on the brink of destitution and inequality and suffer from continuous routine humiliation and exploitation at the hands of upper castes people. Though the caste system has not maintained its rigidity in the occupation of caste Hindus, many "untouchable" communities have been forced to continue their occupations up till now, as leather workers, disposers of dead animals, or manual scavengers, and other tasks are deemed too ritually polluting for upper castes.<sup>14</sup> Many times, the members of these groups are being threatened with physical abuse and social boycotts for refusing to perform demeaning tasks. Some studies suggest that migration and the

anonymity of the urban environment have resulted in upward occupational mobility among some Dalits, for example, the untouchable Bhangi communities who were sweepers earlier have now turned to sewer men.

This occupation is prone to affliction and transmission of many infectious diseases including cholera, typhoid, hepatitis and other intestinal respiratory and skin infections, and the absence or inadequate use of safety requirements aggravates the situation further. As revealed by medical experts, people of all age groups of the 'Dalit' communities are vulnerable to high risk health problems especially among young adults working in sewer pits and dry toilets, who may or may not have been vaccinated against viruses such as polio, which spreads from person to person primarily via the faecal-oral route.<sup>15</sup> Specifically, mothers who are exposed to infected excreta also stand a high risk of transferring the virus to their babies.

### **Railway Tracks and Excreta**

Numerous studies highlight that the Indian Railways is one of the biggest employer of manual scavengers in India. Still, at the station, workers are spotted picking up plastic bags and paper cups along with human waste. This news came to public after Safai Karamchari Andolan (SKA), a union of manual scavengers, filed a public interest petition in the Supreme Court in 2003.<sup>16</sup> The petition had sought proper implementation of the 1993 Act that bans manual scavenging and recommends their rehabilitation. The Gujarat government's affidavit claimed that barring a few trains, the railways do not employ any technology to keep its toilets and tracks clean. Similarly, at Ahmedabad Railway Station, which is popularly known as Kalupur station, the 'safai' workers are still engaging in this inhuman work. Many a time, they remove the filth using bare hands.<sup>17</sup> They clean the railway tracks and excreta, only by scrapping with wire brooms and without proper dress code and gloves. In recent times, the cleaning contract has been given to a firm that clears garbage on the tracks using jet spray machines. Before this initiative, Safai Kamdars were seen clearing the tracks of litter, especially plastic bags, to prevent it from choking the drains. Yet, many times the Safai Karamcharis argue that they are not given any protective gas, but at the same time contractors say that their workers are not agree to use it.<sup>18</sup>

### **Practice of Manholes**

In spite of the ban, there are evidences where humans are made to plunge into the gutters to unclog the underbelly of the city.<sup>19</sup> In the city areas of Ahmedabad flush latrines have been connected to sewage lines, which is very

big in size. When they are blocked, the scavenger through the manhole gets in it and dives in the filthy water with a bucket to remove all kinds of substance, such as plastic, cloth, glass pieces, etc.<sup>20</sup> Different studies reveal that several manhole workers have died as soon as they went down into the sewer, and their dead bodies had to be pulled out. Several workers become blind during the work.

Over the last three decades, in the city of Ahmedabad alone, several hundred manhole workers have died due to gas poisoning. They often fall prey to occupational hazards like exposure to harmful gases, drowning, muscular-skeletal disorders, serious skin infections, respiratory disorders and cardiovascular ailments. Moreover, the sewerage or manhole workers are at high risk when they are exposed to dangerous gases for a prolonged time. It is also found, that during the last ten years, the official number of manhole workers who died in Ahmedabad is reported to be about 106.<sup>21</sup> Most recently, a woman worker Neelam Parmar had died and three others had to be rushed to a hospital following a gas leak incident in Danilimda.<sup>22</sup> In the city of Ahmedabad, the manhole workers are not provided with any safety equipment to protect them from dangerous gases and other toxic wastes;<sup>23</sup> rather, industrial wastes are dumped in the manholes, which are cleaned by the Dalits. On 08 September 2015, a Special Operation Group (SOG) of Ahmedabad district police had arrested eight persons for dumping suspected industrial waste into open manholes near Moraiya village of Ahmedabad district and Narmada canal near Vishalpur village.<sup>24</sup> From the medical expense count, government support is not up to mark. The workers spend about 25 per cent of their income on medical expenses which are basically incurred due to their work in the first place.

### **Pathological Laboratories, Post-mortem Rooms and Maternity Homes**

In the pathological laboratories the stool and urine is generally carried out by the Dalit community after the tests. In the post-mortem room also the dead bodies are handled by them, like opening up of the dead body, sewing the dead body after the autopsy, the cutting of the body, breaking the skull, removing bones for examination, etc.<sup>25</sup> Like all other parts in the country, these entire job in the hospital and maternity home are done by Bhangi communities in Gujarat. The women from the Bhangi community remove blood, urine, shit stained bed sheets in hospitals and clean the tables of labour room in maternity homes.

### **Laws, Policies and Critical Evaluations**

India had passed a legislation in 1993, prohibiting manual scavenging, which requires that state governments demolish all the dry toilets that exist; so that

the manual scavenging occupation could be abolished, and the community could be encouraged to look for other more suitable occupations. Moreover, a law promulgated on 06 December 2013, nationwide, except Jammu and Kashmir, prohibited manual scavenging and described the practice of manually cleaning and handling of human excreta from dry latrines, open drains or pits and sewers without protective gear, as an offence.<sup>26</sup> Mahatma Gandhi also first called for the abolition of manual scavenging - a degrading practice, which has been continuing since his times. Yet, this practice continues in many parts of India even today, including in Gujarat. In spite of all the developmental provisions and programmes, Manav Garima, a community-based organisation fighting for the rights of the scavenger community – Valmiki, in Ahmedabad, has found that there are 126 spots where manual scavenging is practiced in the AMC. Moreover, 188 dry latrines still continue to operate in the city of Ahmedabad.<sup>27</sup>

The menace of manual scavenging in Ahmedabad is also on the upward incline because of ignorance of the people and there is the lack of knowledge and information even among the workers. The Manav Garima survey suggests that most 'safai karmacharis' are not even aware of the fact that the practice of manual scavenging is prohibited by law since 1993. When they are told that it is illegal, they express their helplessness. In fact, they fear that the AMC or "the private contractor, through whom they work, would either harass them or remove them from their job if they refuse to manually clean up the night-soil." Hence, they continue to lift night soil in order to retain employment.<sup>28</sup> A step forward, the Gujarat government has banned manual scavenging since 1992 under the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act. However, in spite of these provisions, the number of dry latrines, which require manual scavenging has only increased and stands at 96 lakhs, while over five lakh people, with 95 per cent Dalits, are still working as manual scavengers.<sup>29</sup> The Safai Kamdar Vikas Nigam in a reply to an RTI query disclosed that in the last ten years, Gujarat has seen deaths of 98 manual scavengers. In this case, Ahmedabad had witnessed 18 cases of death of manual scavenging which is the highest in the state.<sup>30</sup>

In a 1997 report, the National Commission for 'Safai Karamcharis' claimed that manual scavengers are "totally cut off from the mainstream of progress" and are still subjected to the worst kind of oppression and indignity. What is more pathetic is that 'Safai Karamcharis' are transformed into the most oppressed and disadvantaged sections of the population.<sup>31</sup> Despite the law against this manual scavenging, which was made more stringent by Indian Parliament, the Comptroller and Auditor General of India revealed in a report on November



2014, that the prohibited practice of carrying night soil is still prevalent in the supposedly ‘developed state of Gujarat, where the High Court began proceedings in 2008 on the basis of a Times of India report, which revealed that there were 64,195 sanitation workers who had to do scavenging manually.<sup>32</sup> Moreover, the Census 2011 data revealed that there are 2,566 households in the state where night soil is removed by hand and.<sup>33</sup> Mr. Macwan, who heads the Navsarjan Trust, said, that when the Trust was started in 1997, there were 32,000 people engaged in manual scavenging. Hence, in May 2007, the government report revealed that there were 64,000 of people engage in the same activity. It implies that in a decade it increased to double. Not only this, in spite of strong and repeated reminders by the NGOs fighting against this manual scavenging and continuous effort of the state officialdom, this practice has been continuing till date in Ahmedabad and its suburbs such as Dholka town, which is situated around 50 kilometres from Ahmedabad.<sup>34</sup>

Many surveys claim that the 1993 law on banning the practice of manual scavenging and subsequent court judgments have not changed the lot of these Dalits in Gujarat, who like their ancestors, continue in the same occupation, having no vertical movements, or progress of their social status and continue to live unhygienic, inhuman conditions. The ‘Bhangis’ live in the region of Ahmedabad next to dumping yards and open drains and they have no adequate means of toilet facilities. Government officials are yet to give due attention, and/or resolution to these issues. When the Urban Development and Urban Housing Department of Government of Gujarat submitted a report, dated 01 November 2013, in the Assembly claiming that the Dholka municipality had taken several steps to improve facilities in slum areas and municipality had decided to build more pay-and-use toilets, the Navsarjan Trust volunteers challenged the data and from the collected data it argued that while some of the toilets have been made, others are in the process of being constructed so that the manual scavenging per se remains intact, like before.<sup>35</sup> More to say, while construction of toilets has taken place in upper caste areas, the spots where the lower castes, particularly the Dalits live, remain neglected like before.

Currently, there is a programme called ‘Ambedkar Awas Yojana’ started by the social welfare department of the Gujarat government, where the government would build housing facilities for the sanitation worker community. However, this scheme would have a negative impact, especially as the government would build houses specifically demarcated on the basis of caste, leading to ghettoisation of the lower caste and sanitation-worker community.

In 1992, the government launched a national scheme: National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers which called for the identification, training, and rehabilitation of 'Safai Karamcharis' throughout the country. In January 2007, the Self-Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers (SRMS) was launched with the objective of rehabilitating 3.42 lakh manual scavengers and their dependents by March, 2009. However, these two schemes have not been implemented whole heartedly. Although the main components of the scheme included skill training and financial assistance (loan and subsidy) for self-employment, the workers who still clean up black soil are yet to be provided assistance for rehabilitation under any central government or state government schemes.<sup>36</sup>

In a 2003 report by the Comptroller and Auditor-General, which was among the documents before the Gujarat High Court, it was observed that the National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers and their dependents, launched in 1992 had failed to achieve its objectives even after 10 years of its implementation and even though it involved investments of more than Rs. 600 crores. The CAG found that much of the allotted fund was either unspent or underutilised. The National Commission for 'Safai Karamcharis' viewed that the government progress has not been altogether satisfactory due to inadequate attention paid to it by the state governments and concerned agencies and Gujarat was a reference as well. It has benefited only a handful of 'Safai Karamcharis' and their dependents.<sup>37</sup> In the same tune, at a workshop on manual sanitary workers in Gandhinagar, 2014, Principal Secretary of Social Justice and Empowerment, Sanjay Prasad virtually conceded that the government did not have any exact data of manual scavengers to execute the scheme as directed by the Union government under various schemes.<sup>38</sup>

The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines Prohibition Act, 1993, banned the construction of dry latrines and prohibited employment of manual scavengers. It also made provision that failure of the execution of the Act by the officials will lead to punitive measures against them-ranging from up to one year imprisonment or a fine of rupees 2000, or both. However, till date there has not been a single prosecution under the Act. Further, Gujarat declared itself free of manual scavenging in 1992, but deaths due to manual scavenging continue to be reported very frequently.<sup>39</sup>

Like the Slum Rehabilitation policy of 2010, the Act of 2013 reiterated the provision that an individual who will be listed under the list prepared by the government for manual scavengers, will be entitled to get rehabilitation facilities. Under this provision two ways of identifying manual scavengers are followed;

individual self identification and survey by local authorities. Unfortunately, the Act also gave discretionary powers to the authorities to decide whether to do a survey or not, and the Supreme Court has stated that majority of government surveys have been unproductive.<sup>40</sup>

However, the former chief minister of Gujarat, Narendra Modi's *Karmyog* book, which was a compilation of his speeches to IAS officials at various points of time, addressed that: "I do not believe that they (Valmikis) have been doing this job just to sustain their livelihood; rather it is their duty to work for the happiness of the entire society and the god. They have to do this job bestowed upon them by Gods; and that this job of cleaning up should continue as an internal spiritual activity for centuries."<sup>41</sup> Further, in 2009, addressing 9,000-odd 'Safai Karmacharis', (cleanliness workers) he likened the 'Safai Karmacharis' job of cleaning up others dirt' to that of a temple priest. He addressed them, "A priest cleans a temple every day before prayers, you also clean the city like a temple. Yours and the temple priest's work are alike."<sup>42</sup> After coming to power as Prime Minister, Narendra Modi has taken into consideration the abolition of manual scavenging by 2019, also, as part of a 'Swachh Bharat Abhiyan' (SBA) but the greater problem persists in the form of getting the actual number of manual scavengers. As per the recent data available with the government, there are a total of 11,635 manual scavengers across the country. The sad news is that, only 12 states have submitted detail reports where Uttar Pradesh is the only state having a reliable numbers suggesting 10,016 manual scavengers.<sup>43</sup>

Since the root causes of manual scavenging include the insanitary waste disposal practices, the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) was conceived by the Union government in 1999 which was renamed as 'Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan' (NBA) in 2012 to ensure 100 per cent sanitation in rural and urban areas by 2017. And it was replaced with SBA in 2014. The objectives of SBA for the urban areas include; firstly, elimination of open defecation; secondly, eradication of manual scavenging; thirdly, modern and scientific municipal solid waste management; and fourthly, effective behavioural change regarding healthy sanitation practices.<sup>44</sup> The initiation of SBA has started and achievements are yet to be felt by the community.

### **Ahmedabad Parivartan Programme by the AMC**

Ahmedabad Parivartan, also known as the Slum Networking Programme (SNP), started in September 1995, was launched by the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. It is a participatory approach towards achieving sustainable water

supply and sanitation in the slums of Ahmedabad city, with a view to enhance the quality of life and health in the slums through the proper provision of basic services of water and sanitation. The project provided individual household level sanitation facilities. Apart from the government financial support through the AMC, the concerned communities also contribute financially for ensuring ownership in management and maintenance of the infrastructure. Amongst all other provisions, the slum households have been connected to the existing water supply and sewer services provided in their areas. This initiative of AMC is exemplary of successful partnership between the community, the private sector and government in the process of policy making and policy execution. Being responsive to the demands, the project has been modified from time to time to incorporate more toilet facilities in slum households, thereby further assuring toilet maintenance by the family units.

### **Non-state Initiatives**

Although the government of Gujarat is taking many initiatives to bring about an over-all change in the sanitation process, it is still a complex and difficult issue wherein the support of different stake holders in the society is of immense necessity. Hence the non-state initiatives of the non-governmental organisations (NGOs) alongside individual and collective efforts could effectively address and resolve the issues, pertaining to sanitation workers. As discussed earlier, the state and the bureaucracy by their very nature are not able to design and deliver for the disadvantaged sections of the population very successfully. This is largely in congruence to the fact that the state cannot succeed completely in alleviating the suffering of disadvantaged groups. Hence, the state has given recognition and encouragement to NGO initiatives. Significantly, Gujarat has a relatively conducive environment for their purpose. The NGO initiatives include the areas of awareness, mass mobilisation, organisation, identification of critical issues and solutions, and make the government supported programmes more responsive to the needs felt by the community. They help in organizing communities in order to influence government programmes that affect them. Since they are in closer proximity to the target beneficiaries, the NGOs play a positive role for the effective implementation of sanitation programmes. Some of the NGOs and their initiatives are worthy of mention here.

The Mahila Housing Sewa Trust (MHT) aims at improving household requirements such as access to basic services and housing finance. Their activities are seen in Ahmedabad, Surat and Vadadara slums, and in association with USAID, it aims at a successful “Sahbhagi Yojana 2 Support Project” (SY2SP)

for the improvement of the basic physical infrastructure of the slums along with an active participation from the slum dwellers towards the same aim. The project, so far, has provided basic services to 30,069 slum dwellers, micro finance services to 9,830 persons, health services to 42,456 and training and information to 3,437 persons.<sup>45</sup>

The Pravah is a network of NGOs which aims at self-reliance in accessing adequate and safe drinking water on a sustainable basis. The Manav Garima is working for restoring the rights of the 'Valmikis' in Ahmedabad through legal and constitutional means. So far, it has been able to identify and file 23 cases demanding compensation for the aggrieved families. The 'Jan Vikas' has initiated a process to educate the sweepers to demand and use proper equipments, as well as facilitating the implementation of rehabilitation scheme for the scavenging community (*Caste Matters*, 2007: 4). Kamdar Swasthya Suraksha Mandal (KSSM, "Workers' Organisation for Health and Safety"), an Ahmedabad-based organisation, has been at the forefront, fighting for the rights of sewerage and manhole workers, better wages and the protection of workers from exploitation. In its effort to spread the movement, it supports several trade unions of manhole workers, sanitation workers and manual scavengers and redressal of grievances through legal means.<sup>46</sup> The PRIYA and Unnati campaigns on sanitation and solid waste management for a positive impact on the lives of the poor, marginalised and excluded sections of the society, under the two broad themes "Reforming Governing Institutions" and "Civil Society Building",<sup>47</sup> VIKAS is another organisation, which has its objective of total slum development in urban areas of Ahmedabad and Vadodara.<sup>48</sup> The Navsarjan Trust, whose initiatives were discussed earlier, is working on the issue of manual scavenging in Gujarat since 1997. It has collected data about manual scavenging and even challenges for their rights.<sup>49</sup>

## Conclusion

The sanitation workers are victims on several counts. They are discriminated on the basis of their caste; restricted to enter temples and places of worship; and basically destined to accept this occupation due to their supposed low caste. They are also prohibited from participating in social functions and religious rituals of the higher caste groups. The work place condition is garbed in unhygienic conditions with no proper equipments to clean and improper safety measures. Since many of the sanitation workers are contractual, government benefits hardly reach them in the context of accidents or accidental death, rehabilitation and education. Thanks to the 37-day strike of the AMC's sanitation workers in the new west zone which was called off after the ruling party assured

the workers that their long-standing demands, including permanent employment, would be looked into. So, in spite of some achievements and several constitutional, statutory and administrative safeguards and framework, the plight of the manual scavengers has not improved as per the policy objectives and targets. In this critical juncture, the intervention of the NGOs or civil society has brought better hopes for the workers.

However, there is much to do and both the private, public and civil society should work in unison to make Ahmedabad urban sanitation and the condition of sanitation workers better. Some of the interventions in this regard are crucial for Ahmedabad in particular and Gujarat as a whole. Firstly, to avoid work place injuries, they must be provided with protective gear that is functional and easy to use. Secondly, a research centre needs to be established to investigate all aspects of the lives of sanitation workers, including their working conditions, health problems, challenges in accessing and continuing with education, problems specifically faced by the women workers. As an outcome, there should be efforts that will tackle these issues common to them, more effectively.

Thirdly, since the workers are exploited and deprived of the government facilities many times, there should be easy legal approaches to appeal to the court and expenditures incurred in the legal process should be largely borne by the government. Fourthly, communities themselves should be made aware of their job and working conditions and should discourage and stop unhygienic means of clearing the waste. Fifthly, it is necessary to reduce and stop dry latrines in the train and railway stations and call for the construction of bio-toilets. Sixthly, strict measures and commitment from the government for non-construction of dry latrine, instead, water-sealed latrines and sanitary latrines should be popularised in the city of Ahmedabad and its suburbs. Seventh, the AMC should ensure that garbage is stored in closed containers.

### Notes

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