

Dismantling the Caste

There may be no better parameter to judge the character, values and structure of a society than the manner in which it performs some of the most humble and menial tasks - sweeping, handling garbage or working on clogged gutters and sewage lines. Who are the people who perform these tasks? What methods, implements and protective equipment are used to remove, handle and dispose the filth, trash, sludge and raw sewage. Are these processes well regulated and controlled. Are these jobs open to all or restricted to some. What is the social status, respect and dignity accorded to those who deliver these unpleasant but important and essential services.

Our ruling elite has struggled hard to bless itself with disproportionate prosperity. Many now own multiple businesses and residences both in and outside Pakistan. There is however little to suggest if any of this ever trickled down to the lives and working of ordinary people. The methods, tools and conditions of performing the most dangerous, unpleasant and menial jobs receive no attention or respect. The tools and methods of sweeping our roads or unclogging of gutters have not changed for the last hundred years. The design of the brooms continues to remain unchanged since they were first used by the people of Mohenjo-daro, some 4000 years ago.



A broom can only scatter in the air, push to one side or temporarily dislocate dust, trash or litter.

It almost seems as if humiliation and hazards were purposely designed into the occupation of sweepers and sanitary workers. They wear bathroom slippers instead of safety shoes. They are not provided with face masks to prevent inhalation of dust and bacteria. They do not use hand gloves to avoid contact with filth nor caps or hats to lessen the misery of the sun. Rotten and stinking garbage is a source of several infectious diseases and most of the sweepers suffer from respiratory and skin problems. It is inexcusable for the state to have completely overlooked the health, safety and dignity accorded to sanitary workers.



The manner and the conditions under which the sanitary staff is made to work are inhuman and demeaning



It is not abnormal to see cow dung and horse manure being scrubbed and picked up from the road with bare hands.



Surely a nuclear state could also devise implements to handle and carry the filth in a more civilized manner.

Umerkot, a sleepy little town in Sindh, famous for being the birthplace of Emperor Jalaluddin Muhammad Akbar, suddenly shot into prominence on the 1st of June 2017. An unethical doctor heavily loaded with antiquated and misplaced religious beliefs refused to attend to a sanitary worker Irfan Masih who was brought to the hospital, gasping for breath and needing critical respiratory support. Arriving from the depths of a gutter filled with raw sewage, Irfan was covered with layers of unbearable filth. While the media rightly focused on the criminality and inhumanity of the doctor leading to the death of Irfan Masih, what was not sufficiently addressed was the reason why Irfan and his two colleagues were sent into a death trap of poisonous gases, raw excreta and filthy sludge.



'To enter or not to enter'. He must go back as many times as needed till the gutter gets unclogged and the effluent begins to move.

The misguided doctor and the lack of facilities in the hospital may have been the immediate reasons for the death of Irfan Masih. However the inhumanity, insensitivity and an unspoken caste system adopted by the state and citizens of Pakistan are the true reasons for the deaths and miserable working conditions of sanitation workers. Billions of Rupees of tax payers' money are wasted on decoration of offices, constructing fancy buildings, buying luxury vehicles, pointless foreign junkets and newspaper ads for personal publicity of the rulers. There is however no sympathy, budget, understanding or compassion for the people who risk their lives every day entering deep, confined and highly contaminated spaces loaded with indescribable filth, obnoxious sludge and raw sewage.



Zero protective gear, a sheared spade and the compulsion to feed his children are the only dredging equipment that he knows of.

The inhuman and murderous practice of making sanitary workers enter into gutters and sewage lines must be immediately banned by an Act of Parliament. The first option must be to use Heavy Duty Rodding machines and electric drain snakes to clear and unclog sewage lines. Any entry into a gutter or sewage line must take place only after the concerned departments are able to guarantee a number of essential conditions. These are (a). a written procedure; (b). permission to work (PTW) obtained before each entry; (c). training and availability of operator, attendant and supervisor; (d). air testing for oxygen deficiency and presence of hydrogen sulphide or other poisonous gases; (e). presence of lifting equipment, first aid and ambulance; (f). full body impervious suit; (g) Rubber boots, taped at the ankle (h) Inner and outer gloves, taped at the wrist; (j) safety goggles; (k) Hard hat; (l) Safety harness with life-line; (m) Respiratory protection; including full-face Supplied Air Respirator with a 5-minute escape bottle or Self-Contained Breathing Apparatus.



Trapped in the gutter, with the disgusting and offensive fecal sludge splashing on his face, he pushes the overflowing bucket as fast and as away from his body as possible.



Craving for water and gasping for air – he must exit as soon as possible



A moment when he wants to walk away not just from the foul gutter but also from a loathsome society that forces him to perform this sickening and revolting duty.

A quick analysis of the people performing the sanitary functions reveals a dark and depressing facet of Pakistani society. As the name suggests, Irfan Masih who lost his life in Umerkot, was a Christian. More than 70 percent of the sanitary staff in Punjab are christians. Data collected by World Watch Monitor states that 824 out of 935 sanitation workers in the Peshawar Municipal Corporation are christians. About 6,000 out of 7,894 sanitation workers in the Lahore Waste Management Company are christians. 768 out of 978 workers in the Quetta Municipal Corporation are christians. Islamabad's Capital Development Authority (CDA) has 1,500 sanitation workers and majority of them are christians. Of the 173 sanitary workers designated as 'gutter men' in the Cantonment Board Clifton, are all christians.

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Scores of newspaper advertisements clearly specify that only non-muslims are eligible for jobs of sweepers.

Do non-muslims take up these assignments for the love of descending into gutters loaded with fecal sludge or are they circumstantially compelled to adopt this profession. Job advertisements often state 'non-muslim' as an eligibility or a preferred criterion for the post of sanitary workers. Instead of applying the affirmative action quota for minorities in higher cadres ie. doctors, engineers, judges, ministers and bureaucrats, the state prefers to designate this quota for its most menial and least paid jobs. This may well be considered the unspoken, well-structured and state-promoted caste system of Pakistan.



Perched on cement barriers, sad, gloomy, discriminated and isolated sanitary workers take a rest break. Two make-shift pieces of card board and an old-timer broom are all they have to perform their job.



*Too old, worn-out and nothing to look forward to.
His job does not offer a pension plan and falling sick means losing the day's salary.*



Will these two under-age boys performing the most detestable and demeaning tasks for the society, ever dream of a bright future for themselves or their country?

The deeply entrenched hierarchical caste system in Hinduism has the sanction of Hindu holy scriptures like Shastras and Vedas. It is intriguing how it was happily and voluntarily adopted in a country that was itself created to protect the interests of a minority. An utterly dirty, dangerous, lowly paid and totally contemptuous profession has been carefully moulded for the consumption of the non-muslims. They are thus marginalized, ghettoized and turned into social outcasts. Even without formally calling them Dalits, Harijans or Untouchables, we have succeeded in assigning the same concept of pollution and the same occupational segregation to our minorities.

Article 27 (1) of the Constitution of Pakistan says, "No citizen otherwise qualified for appointment in the service of Pakistan shall be discriminated against in respect of any such appointment on the ground only of race, religion, caste, sex, residence or place of birth." Clearly, we as the state and the citizens, have colluded in violating this important Article. A new law must be enacted to forbid mentioning the condition of religion or sect in any job advertisement for any post. Lastly, if there are hundreds of government officials who get paid in the tune of Rs.500,000 per month and the Chief Executives of private firms who take home Rs.5,000,000 per month, why can the salary for those who are the genuine cleaners of society not be raised to at least Rs.50,000 per month?

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