Understanding the Problems of India's Sanitation Workers

While no one can argue that India may moving in the right direction in terms of sanitation, all is not well.

Despite increasing focus by the government and programmes such as the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, unsafe sanitation work, loosely captured under the catch-all phrase manual scavenging, still exists in India. There are
five million people employed in sanitation work of some sort in India with about two million of them working in ‘high risk’ conditions.

Here is the first article in a series which introduces the situation of sanitation workers in the country, their different personas, the challenges they face, and the solutions that are essential to improving this situation.

The last few years have been the golden age for sanitation in India. What started out as the Total Sanitation Campaign in the 1990s morphed into the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan under the UPA Government and then transformed into the Swachh Bharat Abhiyan with full gusto driven by the prime minister’s special attention. This translated directly into increased budgets, a mission-mode implementation across the country and by official estimates, 80 million additional toilets getting constructed. Now, over 89% of the country’s population has access to a household toilet, compared to 40% in 2014.

Movie stars such as Akshay Kumar made sanitation a household name and through movies such as Toilet Ek Prem Katha, sanitation crossed over into the mainstream. A special focus on financing and participation by the private sector followed, with several prominent companies announcing large initiatives and several banks committing to financing sanitation.

While there is some skepticism about the results achieved and also the methods adopted to achieve these results, at least on the formal record, 457 out of the nearly 700 districts in India are now “open defecation free”.

And the trajectory seems to be changing. With October 2019 fast approaching, there has been a very real shift in the dialogue within the
government and the entire sanitation ecosystem, with most actors now emphasising a shift away from just construction of toilets to their actual use, maintenance and most importantly, treatment of waste. This has led to an increasing focus on business models and tenders focused on decentralised waste treatment with several states issuing tenders for faecal sludge and septage management. The vocabulary is also shifting from open-defecation free to ODFS/ODF+, which are frameworks that measure the safe disposal of waste.

**Still a long way to go for sanitation workers**

While no one can argue that this is the right direction for India to be moving towards, all is not well. Glaring in its omission in formal planning is any meaningful focus on the harsh realities of the millions of sanitation workers who work across the sanitation value chain in urban and rural India, and are key to making the programme a success. This problem of “manual scavenging” as it is commonly called, is not new and is deeply rooted in India’s caste system, which assigns duties such as the cleaning of human faecal waste to people born in the lowest sub-castes of the Dalit community.

Attention has been brought to this issue for many decades: Leaders and statesmen such as Mahatma Gandhi and B.R. Ambedkar have commented on this and proposed cleaning toilets. However, these practices continue both in rural India, where dry latrines still get cleaned, and, over the last few decades, in urban India, where men and women physically get inside sewer networks and septic tanks to clean blockages despite extreme hazards and risks. There are deaths daily, reported and unreported, and severe social stigma is a constant companion.

Thanks to efforts by the media and committed organisations in the recent past, there has been frequent coverage, but this is not translating into official policy, programme or budgets. For the most part, there has been a quiet acceptance and a turning away from this aspect of the Indian sanitation programme. With the exception of outrage displayed by individuals such as Bezwada Wilson and the media, and reactionary announcements and policies by the government, there hasn’t been much
structured problem-solving for this. All sanitation workers are still called “manual scavengers” and there isn’t a nuanced understanding of the diversity of sanitation work, different personas of people who work as sanitation workers and the kinds of solutions that are likely to be sustainably effective. Most importantly, there are very few viable alternatives.

Sanitation workers present a multi-faceted challenge

Dalberg, a global advisory firm, has engaged on a range of key strategic questions within the Indian sanitation ecosystem. This process has led to the recognition that the first step in addressing the challenge is to begin from first principles and develop a textured understanding of the problem.

In partnership with the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, a Dalberg team carried out a research and strategy study over six months to identify the different types of sanitation work that exist across the value chain, the range of people who carry out this work, examined the challenges they face and issues that hold back ecosystem progress, and then developed solutions to address different aspects of this problem. This was then followed by a separate project focused on implementing innovation pilots across India in 2018.

Five buckets of insights are worth calling out at the outset.

1. Firstly, there are nine kinds of sanitation work that exist across the sanitation value chain in urban and rural India. These range from the cleaning of septic tanks to maintaining and troubleshooting sewer networks in urban areas, cleaning and maintaining public and community toilets, cleaning household latrines, cleaning public drains that often have faecal waste along with other hazardous materials. These types of sanitation work vary significantly on the types of risks that workers encounter, the mode of employment – government, contractual, or daily wage based – and the remuneration. Any strategy to improve the situation of sanitation workers must take into account this diversity.
2. Across these nine types of work, we estimate that there are approximately five million sanitation workers engaged either full time or part time work. This includes about two million workers who are engaged in ‘high risk’ work types such as septic tank cleaning, sewer cleaning, public toilet cleaning and drain cleaning, whereas three million workers primarily clean household toilets as domestic help.

3. These workers work both in urban and rural India in a 40-60 ratio. Most urban workers are occupied in drain cleaning whereas most rural workers work in school toilets and also household toilets. Men and women are differently occupied across these nine kinds of sanitation work. Most men work as sewer cleaners and septic tank cleaners, whereas most women are occupied in latrine, railways and school toilet cleaning. Women working in cleaning railway tracks or public drains face special challenges because of work timings (at night) and the lack of empathetic female supervisors as well as easy access to restroom facilities.

4. A range of interventions and innovations are needed to address this challenge and our series will describe these in detail. However, at the highest level, they fall in four different buckets.
   1. Solutions focused on entry into sanitation work: These solutions include having formal ID cards, better contract design.
   2. Solutions focused “on the job” that make the work safer, more dignified and more rewarding: These include better safety equipment, mechanisms for redressal of complaints.
   3. Solutions focused on “progression from sanitation work” including creating entrepreneurial opportunities, better access to finance.
   4. And finally, cross cutting solutions that involve easing access to special benefits, regulatory revisions, significantly larger budgets.

5. Finally, the roadmap to improving this situation for sanitation workers in India will involve a combination of proactive piloting of solutions across cities and rural locations and an extensive sharing of lessons between stakeholders. It will also require significant increase
in budgets focused on sanitation worker safety within governments and larger budgets focused on innovation for sanitation worker safety, innovation within donors and philanthropic actors. And crucially, it will require ongoing attention in the public sphere through media events and civic engagement.

Also read: ‘They Were Hired for Housekeeping and Then Forced to Enter the Sewer’

Over the coming weeks, this series will detail insights covering the segments of sanitation workers, their unique personas, the challenges they face carrying out sanitation work and the hardware-behavioural-financing-policy solutions that are essential to improve the situation of sanitation workers in India.

_Nirat Bhatnagar is a partner at Dalberg Advisors._
The Nine Kinds of Manual Scavenging in India

Rather than continue using the umbrella term 'manual scavenger', a comprehensive classification of the various kinds of sanitation work can better help policy practitioners to customise and improve their programs.

Despite an increasing focus by the government and programs such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, unsafe sanitation work – loosely captured under the catch-all phrase ‘manual scavenging’ – still exists in India. There are over 5 million people employed in sanitation work of some sort, with about 2 million of them working in ‘high risk’ conditions.
Here is the second in a series which introduces the situation of sanitation workers in the country; their different personas, the challenges they face, and the techno-social-financial-policy solutions that are essential to improving this situation.

The problem of manual scavenging and improving the conditions of those employed in the sanitation ecosystem has been an issue the Indian government has been trying to tackle since the country’s independence. The Scavengers’ Living Conditions Enquiry Committee was set up in 1949 to look into the state of scavengers in Bombay, and since then various commissions and advisory boards have tried to tackle this issue.

In 1993, an Act, the first of its kind, specifically for the protection of manual scavengers was instituted. Called the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 – it defines ‘manual scavenger’ as “a person engaged in or employed for manually carrying human excreta.” The employment of manual scavengers according to the act is prohibited as a criminal offence however no one was charged with employing workers in the 20 years the law came in to force.

The recently enacted Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 gives a detailed definition of ‘manual scavenger’ as follows:

“a person engaged or employed, at the commencement of this Act or at any time thereafter, by an individual or local authority or an agency or a contractor, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces or
premises, as the Central Government of a State Government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed…”

But there remains a descriptive fallacy here – the definition of manual scavengers as per the Act above is narrow and excludes a wide variety of work done by diverse people in terms of numbers employed, gender, and location. The current definition describes them as a single amorphous category, but leaves out other types of sanitation work such as drain cleaning or even the cleaning of toilets by domestic help.

A study called the Sanitation Workers Project conducted by Dalberg Advisors found that there are almost five million people involved in sanitation work across the country; that this work is of nine different types that varies in terms of risk exposure, payments, and policy regulation. The study recommended that the formal definition of ‘manual scavengers’ should be disaggregated to account for these types of work.
The government only recognises latrine cleaners, railway cleaners, sewer cleaners and faecal sludge handlers as manual scavengers, but the data is very poor and almost everyone agrees that these figures are a gross underrepresentation. Estimates made by different organisations have yielded numbers ranging from 182,000 – 2 million for these types of work. Waste treatment plant workers, drain cleaners, community and public toilet cleaning, domestic workers and school toilet cleaners are not recognised under the Act, though they work with human faecal matter and other dangerous waste too.

Classifying sanitation work into nine different categories and acknowledging the differences and intricacies specific to each type, would help create laws, targeted schemes, and focused interventions to
address the problems sanitation workers face. These nine types of work are briefly summarised below.

1. Sewer cleaning is the process of unblocking and cleaning sewer and wastewater drains. The work is usually complaint-based, seasonal (rainy season) and occasionally for preventive maintenance. Since sewers are only in urban areas, a large percentage of the work takes place there. It is estimated that there are around 1,53,000 sewer cleaners – all of them men;

2. Latrine cleaning is the process of emptying dry/single-pit latrines – primarily in rural areas. The process involves daily collection and transport/emptying of faecal matter. There are 7,70,000 latrine cleaners, 90% of whom are in rural areas and 95% of them are women;

3. Faecal sludge handling is the process of emptying, collecting and transporting human waste from septic tanks. The work is usually carried out on demand, while de-sludging frequency varies greatly ranging anywhere from 6 months to 10 or 15 years. 80% of faecal handling is carried out in urban unplanned localities. There are currently around 22,000 workers – all of them men;

4. Railway cleaning involves cleaning faecal matter from railway tracks and platforms as well as cleaning out railway toilets. Both activities need to be carried out several times a day. There are approximately 95,000 railway cleaners – approximately 80% are women and the rest are men;

5. Treatment plant work requires workers to maintain and operate sewage and faecal sludge treatment plants on a daily basis. Workers are mostly in urban areas spread across India – working in the 527 STPs/FSTPs. There are around 6,000 male workers and no women;

6. Community and public toilet keeping is the process of maintaining these bathrooms on a daily basis. Workers are usually from both rural and urban areas (mostly slums and public convenience shelters). There are approximately 2,0,2000 cleaners – 75% of them are men;
7. School toilet cleaning is the process of operating and maintaining school toilets on a daily basis. There are over 8,00,000 cleaners in both, rural and urban schools; 80% of them are in rural schools and over 90% of them are women. We noticed that women preferred working as school toilet cleaners due to an emotional attachment with children and assured monthly income;

8. Sweeping and drain cleaning requires workers to clean open drains and road sweeping. Though not traditionally associated with scavenging, they should fall under the category of scavengers because they often encounter faecal matter due to open defecation and unsanitary latrines connected to drains in urban settings. There are over 4,10,000 drain cleaners where men and women are equally employed;

9. Domestic work is the process of cleaning toilets in middle-high income households and institutions. These workers are all in urban areas and over 2 million are employed all over the country.

Rather than continue using the umbrella term ‘manual scavenger’, such categorisation can bring about a better understanding of the current sanitation ecosystem that exists in India. Doing so can aid policy makers, development agencies, and even the private sector to customise their programs to benefit sanitation workers more effectively.

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#Grit is an initiative of The Wire dedicated to the coverage of manual scavenging and sanitation and their linkages with caste, gender, policy and apathy.
The Six Personas of Manual Scavenging in India

To have a more comprehensive understanding of manual scavenging in India, it is essential to understand the type of people involved in this line of work.

Keshav Kanoria
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Despite an increasing focus by the government and programs such as Swachh Bharat Abhiyan, unsafe sanitation work – loosely captured under the catch-all phrase ‘manual scavenging’ – still exists in India. There are over five million
people employed in sanitation work of some sort, with about two million of them working in ‘high risk’ conditions.

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In the previous article of this series, the nine kinds of manual scavenging in India, including latrine, sewer cleaning, septic tank de-sludging, drain, school toilet cleaning, community, public toilet cleaning, railway cleaning, sewage treatment plant work and domestic work were described. Variations in terms of the nature of work, risk profiles, geographical spread and issues pertaining to each classification were also addressed.

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However, it is insufficient to understand just the different types of work. To have a more comprehensive understanding, it is essential to understand the type of people involved in this line of work, the reasons that draw them and the constraints they operate under – in order to develop solutions and livelihood pathways that are truly meaningful and relevant to them.

In protracted interactions with close to a hundred sanitation workers as part of the Sanitation Workers Project, the Dalberg team unearthed six distinct ‘personas’ of workers based on their backgrounds, motivations and perceived opportunities. They are:

The reluctant inheritor

These are relatively new workers who are forced into the profession due to the death of the primary breadwinner who used to be in this profession. This profile constitutes approximately 10% of the manual scavenging workforce.
Typically 25 years and older, with limited education, ‘reluctant inheritors’ work as railway cleaners, drain cleaners, or sewer cleaners with the government or contractors. They are aware of the issues and hazards that are attendant with the job but are also conscious of family responsibilities, and therefore need an assured, stable income which the government can provide. Given their personal constraints, they have not considered changing jobs, but want to educate their children so they can escape the sanitation worker “trap”.

**The complacent part-timer**

These are workers who face less hazardous environments and are comfortable in the current job and have no desire to move out. This profile constitutes approximately 30% of the workforce.

Typically, 20 to 35-years of age, ‘complacent part-timers’ have been engaged in school and community toilet cleaning for five years or more. Since they work in relatively less hazardous and more friendly environments, the share a sense of belonging with their co-workers and supervisors, and regularly interact with the larger community (given the nature of job). They feel no compulsion to switch occupation – and are looking to continue in the job for the next few years at least.

**The caged bird**

These are workers who have just entered the job and are keen to move on to jobs beyond sanitation but foresee no opportunities for doing so. They constitute approximately 5% of the workforce.

Relatively better educated (class VIII and above) and mostly young males (18-21 years), ‘caged birds’ are engaged in sewer, septic tank and public toilet cleaning. In most cases, they would have recently entered the occupation through informal networks to supplement their family income, but are dissatisfied with the work and understand the risk hazards.

They are optimistic about their future and would like to do something that is respectable in society, ideally a white-collar job in the next two-three years. But they are unaware of the opportunities and pathway to pursue them. They are limited by their need to earn money and constrained by the fees of alternate vocational training.
The trapped traditionalist

These are sewer workers and drain cleaners, typically male, who have been working for several decades and expect to continue doing so. They constitute around 30% of the workforce.

‘Trapped traditionalists’ are engaged in the most hazardous environments, including sewers, septic tanka, and railway and drain cleaning for the last 20 to 15 years. They are not open to exploring other jobs because of the high perceived switching cost – unlearning the current job and going into an unknown environment. Not on government payrolls yet, they live under the “false hope” of becoming permanent employees one day. However, they desire that their children move out of sanitation and are ensuring they complete their formal education.

The transient hustler

These are workers who are looking for jobs that provide the best economic pay-out and currently a job in sanitation provides them just that. They constitute around 10% of the workforce.

In their 20s with limited skills and education, ‘transient hustlers’ are typically found engaged in community toilet cleaning. They entered the profession two-three years ago looking for the best livelihood option in terms of risk adjusted economic pay-out. They have no particular sense of belonging to the job, are always looking out for the “next best thing,” are risk-taking and leverage informal networks to source jobs.

The first among equals

These are permanent sewer workers and drain cleaners who have been doing this job for years and earn significantly more than other workers. They constitute around 15% of the workforce.

Typically, 40 years or older, the ‘first among equals’ have been engaged in sewer or drain cleaning for several years and have become permanent government employees. They have developed a sense of attachment with their work, workers and supervisors. While they understand the unsafe and stigmatic aspects of the job, they value the higher and assured income (earning three-times more than temporary workers) that it provides. However,
they also want their children to break out of the family’s dependence on sanitation jobs.

**Implications for solutions**

While the ‘complacent part timer’ and ‘trapped traditionalist’ require better working conditions and higher pay in their current roles given that they expect to continue in them, the ‘caged bird’ and ‘transient hustler’ would most value support with switching jobs. The ‘reluctant inheritor’ could be best geared for entrepreneurship, perhaps related to sanitation (e.g. operating sewer cleaning machines).

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**Potential solutions will need to be targeted to these personas**

Mapping of potential solutions to personas (Illustrative)

1. Business loans, mentoring
2. Employment helpline
3. Skill training
4. Education assistance for children
5. Health benefits/insurance
6. Regularization of job
7. Leadership training

Note: Figures in brackets based on % of SWs falling into each category based on our interactions—purely an indicative estimate.

Infographic: Overview of personas, size of segments, and mapping of potential solutions

*Keshav Kanoria is senior project manager at Dalberg Advisors.*
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Understanding India's Sanitation Workers to Better Solve Their Problems

We need to devise solutions to India's sanitation problem that are not only innovative but also user-centric and based on a deep understanding of sanitation workers.

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under the catch-all phrase ‘manual scavenging’ – still exists in India. There are over 5 million people employed in sanitation work of some sort, with about 2 million of them working in ‘high risk’ conditions.

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Whenever we come across horrific incidents related to manual scavengers, a very fundamental question is asked is, why do sanitation workers choose to enter such jobs and why do they continue in such jobs even after clear evidence of risks to life?

To answer this question, Dalberg Advisors, a global advisory firm, conducted in-depth field research and interacted with various stakeholders to identify key issues related to the condition of sanitation workers in the country. Twenty-nine key insights we developed can be grouped in four categories: behavioural, social, infrastructure and governance. This article covers behavioural insights influencing entry, continuance and exit of these workers into high-risk sanitation work.

**Family history is the key driver of entry**

A majority of the workers enter this profession because their parents were sanitation workers, and they often replace their parents. Even though workers understand the riskiness inherent in their job, it is almost a rite of passage to continue with the job. Jobs of permanent (those employed by the government) sanitation workers even come with a promise of job replacement for children if something happens to the parents.

The family aspect gets further pronounced as often both husband and wife are in sanitation jobs, and this limits alternative options for their children due to a lack of exposure and inherent biases. A study of
sewerage workers found that most working wives either work as road sweepers or as domestic workers in and around Delhi.

**Workers feel invisible, operate without formal contracts**

In most cases, sanitation workers lack proof of employment, even though they have been doing this job for several years.

“A drain cleaner was hit by a lorry and died without anyone even acknowledging his death and providing grievance compensation. If something were to happen to us, we should be acknowledged at least,” a drain cleaner said during the survey.

Sanitation workers are unaware of their terms of employment, specifics of remuneration structures and schedules. They have a limited view of the exact payment since they do not receive salary slips and are even unaware of their provident fund account details. If they ask for their salaries, they are threatened with lay-offs. Workers employed by subcontractors are even worse-off and operate in an information vacuum, away from any formal employment protections.

**No unified voice for collective bargaining**

Sanitation workers are most often fragmented, moving around the city in small groups of 2-3, and are unable to come together to form collectives. Further, in jobs such as public toilet cleaning, contracts are typically awarded to agencies with operations in several cities. Workers hired by these agencies are rotated between cities quite frequently, further limiting collective agency.

Even where workers exist in large numbers, they tend not to derive any collective bargaining power. Jobs such as drain cleaning and sewer cleaning involve multiple workers local to the city, but the risk to unionise is severe. Workers feel they are disposable and that if were to start protesting, they would lose their jobs.

Workers also lack external support to help initiate collective formation and action. A majority of these workers belong to the ‘lowest’ rungs of
the Scheduled Caste community. These sub-castes that sanitation workers belong to are only 12-13% of all SCs, and their issues get further pushed to the fringe.

**An adverse relationship with gear and machinery**

Most of these workers operate in environments where, after years of practice, the baseline expectation of minimal safety norms is either very low or completely missing. It is considered normal to clean without gear and operating practices are mostly heuristic driven, especially for jobs that are perceived as especially risky. A study found that only 5% of sewer workers were given information about potential hazards by supervisors or other officials, and more than 57% claimed that they learnt of the hazards on the job. Additionally, septic tank and sewer workers join at a young age (~16-18) and rely on experience and knowledge of older workers.

Workers have a conflicting relationship with safety gear. It is true, there is a lot to be desired regarding the design of the safety gear, but workers are not even taught how to use this gear. Workers are not fully aware of the importance of the gear. Moreover, they feel that it hampers their work. For example, it is difficult to hold the shovel during drain cleaning and gloves provided are often loose and slide off.

A majority of the workers perceive machines as substitutes rather than complements to their work, and fear that new machines will replace them rather than aid their work and keep them safe.

**Cost of injuries and illnesses internalised**

With years of exposure, workers have accepted health issues as a regular occurrence and unless probed further, do not even associate their health issues as arising from the job.

Workers perceive work-related injuries and illnesses as personal issues and bear the cost for treatment and missed income. Consequently, they end up bearing significant monthly expenses for medical treatment.
Contractual workers do not have sick leave as a part of their contracts and get further penalised for their illnesses by foregoing wages for the days they are sick.

“We face suffocation, regular stomach aches and skin rashes, even fever almost every other day. There are no health benefits from the municipal government or the contractor,” a sewage treatment plant worker said.

Exit from sanitation work

Workers are risk averse and tend to prioritise assured income over improved safety or potential higher income in an unknown and uncertain job. Experienced workers have a “stick with what you know” attitude and exhibit a very distinct “endowment effect” while valuing their existing job, even though it was learnt with no formal training.

This problem is further exacerbated as contractual workers hope to become permanent one day, and continue with their temporary jobs in this expectation. This ends up being false hope arising from information asymmetry, as there is no evidence of any regularisation in recent years.

Moreover, workers are not willing to take risks to start a business that could potentially pay much more. Workers anticipate variability in earnings and potential dip in the short-term, if they were to start a business and are unwilling to bear this switching cost. Consequently, sanitation workers end up being stuck in dead-end jobs.

“I do this job every day in the hope of becoming permanent. If I become permanent, my salary will be comparable to someone working in a bank (Rs 25,000),” said a drain cleaner who had been working for more than 10 years.

The way forward

By no means should sanitation work continue in its present state and remain a family legacy. However, sanitation work will be required in India as we expand coverage and other countries have found ways to make it dignified and safe. We also need to do the same.
Current attempts at creating solutions have been extremely varied, ranging from activism by NGOs advocating for workers to leave their jobs to formal government regulation. They have met with limited success, as is evidenced by daily news reports highlighting the deaths of even more workers. We need to devise solutions that are not only innovative but also user-centric and based on a deep understanding of sanitation workers.

Further on in this series, we will present solutions that can make a difference and also progress from innovation pilots taking place across cities in India.

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