



They don't exist in surveys conducted. They don't self-declare their existence. The light of the Constitution is not allowed to shine in the poisonous gas-filled sewers in which they work. Even the ordinary labour laws pass them by, when they work in the most dangerous conditions. They are the sewerage cleaning manual scavengers in Goa.

And then they die without existing and their deaths do not create the ripples that other unnatural deaths in Goa normally do. Their cause was never a wave. They are usually migrant and they belong to a really depressed caste whose conditions fail to draw the requisite attention obviously because of the caste location of the people who are involved in decision-making. And yet the work they do has protected health of others at a cheap rate. What can one call these deaths but 'murders by apathy', to borrow a phrase from A Narayan of the NGO Change India?

The newspapers reported that the two workers who died last month, had been engaged by a contractor to clear the sludge of a starred hotel at Bogmalo. A few days later, a case was booked against the contractor who had engaged the workers, though the five star resort that engaged the contractor was not at all seen as having any measure of culpability. The contractor is now reported to be missing.

Reports from different parts of India indicate that the sewerage workers who are most in need of proper labour dues and security are the ones who are generally employed as contract workers. Neither is there a scrutiny of the contractor, nor is there any onus cast on the owner of the premises for hiring a contractor who does not have anything to show by way of safety measures for his workers.

In the case of the sewerage deaths at Bogmalo also, the workers were not locals. The name of one was Gajanan Dayanand Patil, while the other was Vishal Piyush Noronha from Mangalore. What is it about our humanity that these deaths do not stir us?



There is no comprehensive data about manual scavengers. Goa is happy to even deny their existence. As per the 2011 Census, out of 3,22,813 households in Goa, 667 households had night soil disposed into open drains, but the column of the number of open drains serviced manually read as nil. Correspondingly, the State-wise funds released under the Total Sanitation Campaign during the last three years, and also the current year, for Goa was zilch.

Maybe Goa doesn't have people carting human excreta. But the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, defines a manual scavenger as a person engaged or employed on a regular or contract basis, by an individual or a 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, before the excreta fully decomposes. A person engaged or employed to clean excreta with the help of devices and protective gear is not considered a 'manual scavenger',

But the deaths of people now and in the past in the sewers show that manual scavenging, by way of sewerage cleaning without protective gear, is very much alive in Goa. Such workers because of the way manual scavenging is defined come within the twilight area of being manual scavengers in the sense of dealing with the sludge before complete decomposition, and yet not being definitively so considered because if they do work of this nature with the help of devices and protective gear they are not considered manual scavengers.

Earlier last month, Goa's Directorate of Social Welfare beseeched manual scavengers to make a self declaration to the block development officer of their respective taluka about their profession so that necessary steps can be taken for their rehabilitation or regulation of their work. No one seems to have yet declared that he or she is a manual scavenger, and yet there are deaths of manual scavengers. The series of sewer deaths confirm that there are no protection systems for the workers. Therefore they should have been considered as manual scavengers and be rehabilitated.

The Tourist Trade Act must put an embargo on any tourist trade establishment engaging contractors who do not comply with labour laws and ensure proper working conditions for the workers they engage.

One Part Existence

The system of manual scavenging is rooted in casteism that imposes this work on persons at the lower rungs of the caste hierarchy. This kind of culture that sees this work as God-ordained for certain castes finds legitimation in Narendra Modi's book 'Karmayog' (2007) where he says that "manual scavenging is an experience in spirituality bestowed upon Dalits by gods and they must continue doing their work happily for centuries". To this, one can only retort tongue in cheek, "How unfortunate that Brahmins have not been bestowed with this experience! And may be there should be 100% reservations or preference for Brahmins and other upper castes in these posts of safai karmachari in order to also experience this spirituality!" After all, in August last year, the Central Government had listed manual scavenging as a career option on its National Career Services Portal.

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