

'It Has to Be Done Only at Night'

Human Waste Disposal in Bengaluru

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India's National Urban Sanitation Policy and its flagship programme, the Swachh Bharat Mission, strongly recommend mechanical technologies for safe faecal sludge management. But, how do septic tank cleaners live and work, and why are their practices not "safe"? An evening spent in observation of their work and in conversation with cleaners and truck drivers in Bengaluru is recounted.

India's National Urban Sanitation Policy (MOUD 2008) and its flagship programme, the Swachh Bharat Mission (Urban) (MOHUA 2017a), highlight the importance of latrine use and of "safe and proper disposal" of sewage for a sanitary city. They report that over a third of India's urban households rely on on-site (not sewer-borne) sanitation;¹ this is probably an underestimation. They recommend that cities should work towards technological, financing and governance initiatives that would ensure safe faecal sludge and septage management, while recognising that Indian cities are currently far from reaching this goal. These and other documents put out by the Government of India (see, for example, MOHUA [2017b]) give little indication of what mechanical (that is, truck-and-hose) sludge removal looks like, how cleaners live and work, and what therefore has to be modified or reformed as new policies are introduced. In other words, what is taking place now, in the name of faecal sludge management? This article describes an evening spent by one of the authors with septic tank cleaners and truck drivers in Bengaluru, India's famed "Silicon Valley." We present the rest of the article in C S Sharada Prasad's voice, as he recalls the evening.

It is 10:30 pm on a chilly night in September 2014 in Bengaluru. "It has to be done only at night. The hotel does not want the neighbours or the guests to see this," Santosh² says in a soft voice. "It is a large, posh hotel. We service it once every two months." Santosh owns a truck in which faecal sludge is removed from septic tanks and transported away to a sewage treatment plant (ideally, if the owner has a permit) or to open drains and waterbodies (commonly, as most owners do not have permits). He is not the driver.

This evening the driver is Deepak; I am riding with him.

Deepak is driving a yellow Tata 909 truck fitted with a large cylindrical tank at the back. The truck enters a residential area and the road narrows; it passes a bridge across an even narrower canal. The gate at the end of the road is the back entrance of the hotel.

The security guard opens the gate and lets the truck in. He points to a spot lit by the spilled-over light from the guard's room, and Deepak manoeuvres the truck to back it up. Even before the truck comes to a halt, two people jump out and start uncoiling the green PVC suction hosepipe hooked to the truck's attached tank. "That short man in the green-and-white chequered shirt is Rajesh. That thinner person in the blue shirt is Prabhu," says Deepak. All three are from the Dalit (Madiga/Madararu) community.

The location of the septic tank is dimly lit by a single incandescent bulb hanging from a braided red and yellow electric wire. We stand on top of what appears to be a concrete tank, which Deepak says is about 15 feet long, 10 feet wide, and 7 feet deep. It should take six to eight trips to empty it all out.³

Rajesh and Prabhu approach the tank, dragging and uncoiling the pipe with their bare hands. The flip-flops on their feet flap louder on the concrete roof of the septic tank than on the asphalt road that led to it. Rajesh opens the lid. From the look of the sludge and the strength of its smell, it does not seem too old. The tank is almost full. Fresh bubbles form and pop every few seconds on the surface of the turbid sludge. "People pay ₹10,000 per day to stay in this hotel, and their shit smells just like everybody else's," says Prabhu.

Rajesh connects the end of the pipe to the pump. Prabhu ties a five-foot long iron bar to the end of the pipe and submerges it into the sludge. The bar acts as a mixer. Prabhu's bony arms start rotating the bar in small circles and the sludge comes to life. The water is now dark and murky with suspended particles. The stench grows stronger. On Prabhu's signal, Deepak starts the pump.

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The roaring engine of the truck starts up the vacuum pump installed between the driver's cabin and the tank. The suction makes the pipe slither for few seconds, but the sludge soon loads into the empty pipe. The pump slurps the sludge, the level of the sludge in the septic tank drops by maybe 15 inches, and the tank fills up in 12 minutes. Deepak turns off the pump and gets into the driver's seat. I sit next to Deepak, and Rajesh squeezes in next to me. Prabhu is the last to enter and closes the door. Deepak turns the truck towards the hotel gate. It is 11 pm and we are out on the road, without washing hands, without any seat belts, with the first load of the sludge.

Dumping the Sludge

The truck goes left towards a wide four-lane road. The traffic has almost completely died down. We cross two major intersections and stop on the side of the main road at a dimly lit part. It is in front of a commercial building that is under construction. Blue corrugated sheets cordon off the construction area. Right where we have stopped, the gutter is connected to a culvert that carries water to the other side of the street. Rajesh and Prabhu connect the PVC pipe to the

draining end of the tank and open the valve. In eight minutes, gravity has emptied the tank. During those eight minutes, several vehicles pass the truck, whose tank has "Septic Tank Cleaning Service" written on it in large bright letters. Nobody stops to look or ask.

Prabhu and Rajesh work quickly to roll up the pipe and hang it back on the truck. They enter the driver's cabin, again without washing their hands. Prabhu takes out a shiny packet of gutkha⁴ from his pocket, shakes it vigorously, tears it open and pours some onto Rajesh's right palm. Prabhu pops the rest into his mouth and throws the empty pack out of the window. Deepak takes out a bottle of whiskey hidden under his seat, takes a quick swig, closes the cap, and slides it over the dashboard. The bottle snuggles between the downward slope of the dashboard and the curve of the windshield, the golden liquid bouncing. Deepak starts the truck and we head back to the hotel. The second load is quicker as the pipe is already laid out; within 15 minutes of arriving at the hotel the truck is on its way to unload the sludge.

Deepak has been doing this work for almost a year, Rajesh for three, but Prabhu has been at this job for almost

five years now. "Ask him," Deepak says, "he has a lot of stories to tell you. He is an expert in finding great dumping spots." "No, no, not an expert," says Prabhu, "I just get lucky, that's it." Prabhu's smile shows his gutkha-stained teeth. "We are always on the lookout for spots to dump. The crucial part of this business is not in finding a customer to fill the tank, but finding a spot to unload it quickly. If we roam around Bangalore with a tank full of sludge, we lose money on other customer calls."

Deepak takes up the story. "When it rains, it's easier. We find a road that is flooded. We park the truck on the side of the road, attach a shorter pipe to the drain valve and lower it just enough to submerge it, then we open the drain valve to let the sludge slowly mix with the flooding rainwater," he says. If someone catches them? "Then we say, oh, the pipe must have fallen off the hook." Do people not notice the sludge coming out of the pipe? "No, not really," says Rajesh, and Prabhu nods in assent. "We only open the drain valve slightly. The rainwater in Bangalore is muddy and already mixed with sewage. And flooded roads have slow traffic, people are completely focused on driving." A slight pause.

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Then, Prabhu laughs. “Who has the patience in Bangalore to stop their vehicle in knee-deep water, wade through sewage, come to us, and ask?” Another pause.

“When I was working for a previous truck operator, we emptied a septic tank in the morning and were driving through heavy traffic on the Ring Road. Two people on a motorcycle passed our truck and blocked it from the front. They got down and started banging on the driver’s door. All the vehicles behind us started honking. One of the guys asked the driver to get down. There was a policeman at the intersection and he did nothing till the guys pulled the driver out and started beating him up. The motorcyclists started shouting that we—the children of whores (*soolemaklu*)—had been careless and were spraying shit on everyone. We realised that our drain valve was not shut properly and the wind must have sprinkled the sludge on these bikers.” The police reprimanded Prabhu’s team, he says, but did not ask for a bribe, “Too busy managing traffic.”

In any case, “it’s not the traffic police, it is civil police who harass us,” says Deepak. “It’s mostly if the public calls the police when they see us dumping somewhere⁵.” Deepak has pulled the truck to the side of the road; we are at the dumping site. Rajesh and Prabhu jump out and hurry to connect the pipe to unload the sludge into the gutter once more. “Once this building is open, we have to find another place to dump the waste,” Rajesh says, opening the drain valve. Prabhu is holding the pipe into the gutter. It can be hard to find a discreet dumping spot. “I have also opened manhole covers in the centre of the city and dumped the sludge there. It has to be done quickly though,” Prabhu says, coiling up the pipe.

“Before you get into the truck, go and get some chicken rice and *pakora*,” Deepak is calling out from the driver’s seat, his hand extended out of the window, waving ₹100. Rajesh collects the money, quickly turns his head to either side to check for traffic, and jumps over the concrete divider to the opposite side of the road.

It is now close to midnight. Most of the city is asleep, but the other side of the road is bustling: fluorescent lamps are mounted on bamboo poles, vendors

have compact fluorescent lights dangling from the roofs of food stalls. Taxi- and rickshaw-drivers are getting hot food. Prabhu, Deepak and I stay inside the driver’s cabin as it is chilly outside. Rajesh reappears. Chicken rice and *pakor*as are wrapped in two separate banana leaf packets, and packed in a nicely folded Kannada newspaper sheet. He passes the pakora packet to Deepak and opens the chicken rice. The aroma of hot food engulfs the driver’s cabin. No one has washed their hands. I am starving, too, but I do not eat meat. The three men finish the rice and pakoras within a few minutes, Deepak takes a swig of whiskey, Rajesh and Prabhu share a packet of gutkha. They start back towards the hotel. “Friends in high school and my neighbours got me drinking,” Deepak says. “Everyone I know drinks. I drink even when I don’t work.” Prabhu says, “I had a small bottle of *sarayi*⁶ before I started tonight. But I only drink when I am home. I eat gutkha when I work.” And Rajesh? “No, I don’t drink. I just eat gutkha.”

A Mamool Matter

The hotel guard moves towards the gate as soon as he sees the truck’s lights. Round three for the night. Rajesh and Prabhu work with the pipes as usual and Deepak controls the pump. This third trip is quick: 10 minutes to fill the tank, 12 minutes to reach the disposal site. While the sludge is draining, Rajesh and Prabhu pee into the gutter. Further down the road, there is a man selling hot tea, with a large thermos in one hand and a pile of stacked plastic cups in his other hand. I get four cups of tea. The tea is watery and loaded with sugar. I am worried that the hot liquid might melt our flimsy plastic cups.

More gutkha, another swig of the golden liquid, and we are back at the hotel. I did not go at the side of the road, so I need a toilet. The restaurant—next to the septic tank—has nice restrooms, and I enter through the back door. It is 2 am, but the housekeeping staff, security personnel, and others on the night shift are eating rice pulao and drinking tea. Three policemen are sitting together at one table. “They are serving hot tea and rice pulao inside,” I tell Deepak, who is trying

to gauge the quantity of the sludge inside the tank. “Yes, they do it every night for all the staff,” Deepak responds. But we could not have stopped for tea there. “We don’t get into the dining area and eat with other people when they know that we have come to empty the septic tank. But sometimes the security guard brings tea for us.” Deepak moves around the truck to turn off the pump. He knows there are policemen eating inside. “The night-beat policemen eat here. They don’t have to pay. They never pay.”

The men are almost done with emptying the fourth load of sludge when a police jeep passes and stops a few metres ahead of us. A hand comes out of the window and beckons, and Deepak gets out and walks towards the jeep. Prabhu and Rajesh just continue doing what they were doing. In a couple of minutes Deepak is back, and Rajesh and Prabhu are coiling up the pipe. The police jeep has gone. What did the police say, I want to know. “What else? Those people want their share. I told him that we still have more trips and we get paid only after we finish all the trips.” Rajesh and Prabhu get back in the truck. Deepak continues: “We know each other quite well. They are on their night beat. But by 5 am they will be back at the police station where we pay them the *mamool*⁷ on our way back.”

It takes three more trips to completely empty the septic tank at the hotel, then it is time to say goodbye. I say, “Thank you for all your time and patience in helping me understand your work.” And Deepak replies, “You know, I am 23 years old now. You are the first older person from another community to call me *neevu*.⁸ I am very happy. Thank you.” I just do not know what to say. I put my palms together once more and take my leave.

NOTES

- 1 On-site sanitation (OSS) is a system in which human waste and waste water are collected, stored and treated at the same location or land area where these are generated. Septic tanks and pit latrines are OSS systems.
- 2 The names of people and places have been changed to protect their privacy. All the conversations took place in Kannada and have been translated into English.
- 3 A trip is one truckload of faecal sludge hauled out of a location. A typical tank on a Tata 909 holds about 4,000 litres of sludge.

