'When You Start Doing This Work, It Is Hard to Eat Dal'
Life and Work of Manual Scavengers

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In 2013, manual scavenging, or the cleaning of "dry" latrines with unprotected hands, was abolished in India. Yet, millions of dry latrines are still manually serviced by Dalit labour. The Prime Minister's Swachh Bharat Mission has put little effort into the health and dignity of sanitation workers relative to its efforts on subsidising and encouraging latrine-building. A few days spent with the Valmiki community in Lucknow are recounted.

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It has been almost four years since, invoking the name of Mahatma Gandhi and declaring that India needed toilets over temples, Prime Minister Narendra Modi launched the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). Its overarching goal is to eliminate open defecation; building new latrines, increasing their use, and raising awareness are the cornerstones of this significant initiative. Though the SBM (Urban) guidelines clearly call for either connecting toilets to sewers or constructing on-site treatment, these guidelines may not be enforced locally. Millions of existing, and even some new latrines, remain "dry." Household-level dry latrines in India, despite the abolition of manual scavenging, continue to be serviced by scavengers.

Much has been written about the dehumanising conditions of their work, and the stigmas they face in their lives. It is not clear how the SBM will mitigate their conditions; it is not clear if the demand for their labour will increase or decrease in its wake. It is clear, however, that India's ambitious sanitation initiative has to put as much effort and financing into the dignity and health of its sanitation workers, and into enforcing its toilet design guidelines as it is putting into eliminating open defecation. This article describes a slice of life in one community of manual scavengers from the Valmiki caste in Lucknow, Uttar Pradesh in December 2014. We tell the story in the voice of C S Sharada Prasad.[1]

Morning, day 1: Meena takes us to the corner of a street where two small huts occupy the centre of a large vacant plot. "This is the place where she stores her stuff," she says. Meena is covering for her sister, Vasumati, today. A broom, a bucket, a U-shaped scooper, and a karahi-like container are stacked on top of one another. They are covered in a thick layer of dust and ash; it is easier to empty a bucket with the ash layer because the contents do not stick to it.

"Nobody steals these?"

"Nobody dare to even touch them." Meena cannot help laughing.

The toilet is at the far corner of the plot close to the street. It is a bamboo façade covered by a thick red blanket, and it stinks. When Meena lifts the cloth and tucks it into the gap in the bamboo frame, it exposes a space of about 3 × 3 feet. The floor of the toilet is just the bare uneven ground. Two sets of flat stones are piled on top of each other and placed apart to create a space to squat; that space is overflowing.

The excreta are loose, and it takes several attempts to gather it all. Meena takes the container to the gutter next to the plot and pours the contents into it. The yellowish excreta dissolves into the blackness of the water flowing in the gutter.

Evening, day 1: "Please come in" Meena greets us that evening, sitting on the floor

next to a stove and is cooking dinner for the family. I am with Sagar, an activist with the toilet cleaners. Meena's welcome is joined by her husband who is watching television with his children. The family is immersed in a Hindi soap opera that I do not recognise.

The house is just a room, 15 × 10 feet. The split door entrance is painted blue and is framed by wooden pillars. At one corner, there is a small kitchen-like setup; in the opposite corner, three mattresses are rolled and stacked. The house is lit by a single fluorescent light on the wall next to the stacked mattresses. "If you are done with your homework, put the books away," Meena says, looking towards her sons. No one moves.

"These children don't understand the value of education or books, you know. They think that education is free. Education is free only if we send our children to government schools. But our children, I save up every month to send both my children to private schools."

"How far is the school?" I ask.

"About three kilometres. It's a Christian school. An auto-rickshaw comes to pick them up—they don't have to walk."

"Better to send the children to a school a bit far away from where she works. If other children get to know the child's caste or the parents' occupation, they bully our children," Sagar says.

"Even my landlord and neighbours don't know about my work. If they find out, they won't rent this house to us. We have to share toilets, fetch water from the same tap." Meena pours milk into the water boiling with tea powder.

"The younger boy is sharp," Meena continues. "Does his homework and goes to school every day. The older boy has not been going to school for almost a month. All he says is that he doesn't like going to school. He's been making and flying kites. I don't know how to make him understand." Her voice is heavy with worry. "The only way to get out of our plight is education. But this boy … !" Meena pours chai into three tiny steel glasses. "I don't want any tea," her husband says, looking at the number of glasses.

During the two hours that we spend at the house, the older boy does not utter a single word. Sagar tells his father to keep him informed about the school situation, and we leave.

Evening, day 2: Meena is the eldest of three siblings: Meena, Vasumati and Shashank. All three are manual scavengers. They inherited this work from their mother. We are in Meena's house, and she and her husband Kishen have come home from work. While they wash themselves, Kishen outside ("It's not too cold yet") and Meena inside ("Please wait just a little bit"), Shashank fetches a metal container, puts in a few pieces of wood, douses the pile with a little kerosene, and starts a fire. Within a few minutes, the small room begins to warm up.

Kishen and Meena, wearing clean clothes, join us. Their son brings them some food from the kitchen: roti and dal. Meena puts extra rotis on Kishen's plate: "You eat. I can make more for myself."

"It helps to have a caring wife," Kishen says teasingly.

Shashank did not have a caring wife. His wife left him; she did not like his line of work, he says. His brother-in-law shakes his head. "She was not a good woman. She never liked you." Shashank looks irritated.

"Do you need more dal?" Meena is changing the topic, and Kishen nods. As she pours dal onto his plate, he turns towards me and says, "You know, when you start doing this work, it is hard to eat dal for a couple of months. Anything yellow makes you sick."

"I could not eat much of anything, any colour," Meena adds. "I was disgusted by my own hands. I always worried about cleaning under my nails."

"Sometimes the households donate old clothes, they put aside some sweets for us during festivals," she continues. "They even address us as their daughters, you know." She pauses for a bit, and then: "I just don't understand."

"As long as you keep cleaning their shit, they shower you with affection. But if you miss your work even for a day, some households yell, they threaten not to pay," Sagar says.

"It's not pleasant work, but it provides a steady income," Shashank reminds his sister. He sounds matter-of-fact.

Meena tells us how she got started as a cleaner. "During my mother's generation, all the work was done by women. When daughters got married, mothers-in-law would ask for a row of houses or sometimes an entire neighbourhood as a gift.[2] Having many sons would allow the mother to accumulate more houses through the arrival of daughters-in-law. She would trade houses when she married her own daughter off."

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She moves a bit closer to the fire as she talks. "Let's go downstairs and have some chai. I haven't had any since the morning." As we all stand up, I ask her, "So, is it hard to find time to drink tea?"

"No, not really. We just don't want to put anything into our mouths until we've washed ourselves. Cleaning the shit of these people is bad enough. I don't want to put that in my mouth."

Evening, day 3: Vasumati's husband does not want her to do this work. "But we have two children and we need money for them," he says. "Sagar has been encouraging us to start a business with the money the government will lend us. But we have never run a business. We don't know how to manage money. I am afraid that the business I start is going to fail and the bank might come and take the only home I have away from me. My family will not forgive me."

"How about a small business that does not need a big investment? A corner shop or a tea stall?"

"A tea stall is a great idea. People drink a lot of tea in Lucknow. But if they get to know our caste, we will run into problems." There is a small silence. Then he says, "To be honest, this job pays well enough to support the family. Though I don't want my children to do this work, I've accepted it as my fate. See, we used to do this job without thinking that much. But now, some activists, organisations, even people from my own community tell me that this is a degrading job and I should quit. What will I do then for a living? There is no easy escape out of this job, you know. So I do this work but now I'm uneasy."

Vasumati looks up from chopping spinach. "7:30 is a good time to start," she tells us.

Morning, day 4: Traversing the narrow streets of old Lucknow in the morning on a motorcycle is an experience in itself. The crowded alleys are flanked by gutters on either side that serve as drains for anything that flows and everything that the flow can carry: storm water, bath water, solid waste, kitchen waste, human excreta, oil from automobile shops, and blood from local abattoirs. Gutters often overflow and flood the streets. A rider has to balance his motorcycle carefully by maintaining a specific speed and avoiding people, cows, dogs, and puddles. He is in the middle of it all but still not a part of it, just inches above the flooded ground that will embrace his feet if he loses his balance and has to put his foot down. Sagar is driving me; it is 7 am.

We knock on the door, and Vasumati comes out without saying anything. She is wearing a yellow sari with a red border. A brown scarf covers her shoulders. A vermillion dot is shining on her forehead. We follow her through a maze of streets to a mound of building debris heaped on an empty plot. She takes out a bucket and a scooper hidden behind the bushes growing on the top of the mound. She pours some loose debris into the bucket, and covers her head and hair with her scarf. She is visible but does not want to be, and society gladly obliges.

The streets have no sidewalks. Air-conditioners are jutting out of houses, and cars, their side-view mirrors folded, are parked as close to the houses as possible.

Vasumati's first stop is a house that we do not even have to enter. There is a hole covered with a metal sheet about three feet away from the entrance. Vasumati slides open the door and squats in front of the opening. She places the bucket close to the wall, and, using the C-shaped scooper, she drags a big lump of fresh excreta out of the hole. The cold morning has kept people indoors, but those who pass her either do not see her or they say nothing. One man looks at us and says, "This woman collects waste from one house and throws it in the backyard of another house." Two teenage girls walking next to him giggle at his remarks and stop for a moment to witness the little drama. Vasumati silently places the scooper back into the bucket and walks on.

"Do people harass you often?" we ask her. "Not everyone. There are always a few who never miss an opportunity."

The second house is large and is at the end of a narrow alley. Vasumati rings the bell, waits for a few seconds and then knocks on the door. "Stop it! I am coming! I am an old woman. It takes time to get myself up and move around, you know!"

"I know. But I also have other houses to clean. Don't you know that I come to your house around this time?" Vasumati shouts back. An elderly woman cracks the door open. "Fine! Get done with your work and get out." And to us: "Tell her not to knock so loud." Then she walks away from us mumbling, "I am an old and weak woman …"

The toilet is to the left of the foyer. It is a small room with one door but three partitions on the floor. The partitions create spaces; one has to squat balancing one's feet on the partition. Considering the amount of excreta we see, we are guessing it is a large family.

"How much do the households pay?" I ask, as Vasumati scoops the waste into her bucket, standing on the partitions. "₹50 per person per month. Children who have not reached puberty and people over 60 years are not counted."

"But they all poop, right?" Vasumati is now washing the floor with a bucket of water and sweeping it with a broom made of coconut fronds, both set aside for this purpose. "Yes, but according to the households, not so much that you pay someone to haul it away … Who can argue with them? These rules have been around for a long time." She moves carefully in that small room, avoiding the water she is flushing into a tiny gutter that carries it out to the street.

The third house that morning has seven persons using the toilet. As Vasumati scoops the waste out of the hole, a lump of cloth stained with blood comes out along with the excreta. The waste from that toilet almost fills her bucket. She walks into a secluded alley behind the house. The alley is covered with rectangular granite slabs. At one corner, one of the slabs is broken and all kinds of rubbish has been crowded into the opening. Vasumati uses her scooper to push the rubbish through the hole, and when the litter is cleared, she throws her load of waste into the gutter.

"I have thirty more toilets to clean today," she says, as she straightens up.

NOTES

1 This article is a composite of multiple similar episodes we encountered in the course of a week, with one Valmiki family.

2 "Gift" means a marriage dowry.