

Intersection of Caste, Gender and labour: Lived experiences of Women Sanitation Workers in Delhi

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Abstract: Engendering caste concepts within academia through research and feminist methodologies of critical reflexivity, inquiry and dialogue is of pivotal significance. This enables an understanding that is in-depth, thus focusing on the critical consequences of what is called a ‘double layered’ marginalisation at the intersection of gender and caste. Academic literature is replete with the sentimental & stigma; exclusionary & policy issues of the same i.e. gender and caste examined intellectually by experts/practitioners and academicians- albeit separately. Studies that interpret social realities at the intersection of essentially the both (whilst discerning both the centripetal and centrifugal forces) are seminal in that they act as a potent tool that attempt an annihilation of caste-based practices that continue to breach human dignity and human rights justified by historical notions of brahmanical patriarchy. Using qualitative methods and tools of inquiry, this study is an attempt at carving out thick descriptions and narratives of the Valmiki¹ womenfolk employed in a select public university where women are employed as sanitation workers. The paper seeks to understand the lived realities of Dalit women in the sanitation work that they perform and how the intersection of caste and gender has shaped the kind of struggles these women face. It attempts to understand both the structural and institutional factors that act as coercive elements in their lived realities within a post-colonial framework of development. It makes the power producing knowledge systems explicit consequently shifting the pivot of the problem from the body of the Valmiki woman to that of systems which produce and reproduce such hierarchical identities. The study aims to deconstruct the factors that affect the nature and type of engagement and participation of the womenfolk in the sanitation work and the forms of coping mechanisms adopted by them to deal with this oppression induced by caste and gender.

Keywords: caste; gender; Valmiki women; intersectionality; sanitation worker; labour

Introduction

Caste may be defined “as a small and named group of persons characterized by endogamy, hereditary membership, and a specific style of life which sometimes includes the pursuit by tradition of a particular occupation and usually associated with a more or less distinct ritual status in a hierarchical system” (Béteille 1965). Berreman (1967) has defined the caste system as a “system of birth-ascribed stratification, of socio-cultural pluralism, and of hierarchical interaction”. Louis Dumont, constructed a textually informed image of caste, portraying two opposing conceptual categories of purity and pollution as the organizing principle of caste structure and hierarchy (Subedi, 2013 as cited in Baruah, 2019).

¹ A low caste status belonging to the Scheduled Caste category in government records.

‘Gender’ and ‘caste’ when entwined together is often seen to produce a body of knowledge that floods one with notions of ‘purity’ and ‘pollution’ finding space in the much-revered Hindu *Shastras* (with reference to the views emanating from *Yajnavalkya*, *Satpatha Brahmana*, *Apastamba Dharmasutra* to name a few). One would find the sexual purity of a woman and the factors that can bring impurity and pollution to a caste group in strong conjunction with one another. From a ‘menstruating virgin’ to ‘widowhood’, the degree of successful regulation of a woman’s sexuality is seen as an indicator of the virility of the male members of the family and a mark of aggressive masculinity without which a man is considered a ‘*na-mard*’, a colloquial term in North India for being unmanly (Baruah, 2019).

An excerpt from Omprakash Valmiki (2003) that bolsters the above-mentioned similar notions further finding space in Dalit literature over a period of time:

The *barat* [marriage party] was eating. My mother was waiting –sitting outside the door with her basket. And when his mother asked the head of the so-called upper-caste family to put something for children, that man pointed at the basket full of dirty *pattals* [leaf plates] and said, “you are taking a basket full of *Joothan*. And on top of that you want food for your children. Don’t forget your place *Churi*” (Valmiki, 2003; edited in Kumar, 2019).

Academic understandings of the ‘Dalit’ and more so the ‘Dalit woman’ per say have been formulated mostly around secondary sources and census data. Feminist writings are markedly at a paucity of first hand and primary accounts of the lived experiences/realities of the Dalit women, conspicuous by its absence. The ‘*masculinisation of Dalit*’ is still a rampant tendency revealed by a review of empirical studies on the subject or a lack of it. The case of the Valmiki women in the current study has been conceptualised in a way that it adds on to the corpus of such already conducted studies, albeit few in number.

Safai karamcharis normally include persons engaged as ‘Sweepers’ or ‘sanitation workers’ in Municipalities, government and private offices. They may be contract employees who work with these organizations. *Safai karamchari* are not manual scavengers (Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment, Instruction Manual). In 1997 report, the National Commission for *Safai karamcharis* claimed that manual scavengers are “totally cut off from the mainstream of progress” and are “still subjected to the worst kind of oppression and indignities” (Vidhuri, 2017).²

Sanitation work has traditionally been divided along gendered lines as well as by caste in contexts such as South Asia, shaping the lived experiences (including recruitment practices and nature of work tasks) of men, women, boys, girls and transgender communities. For example, whilst men and boys commonly descend into sewers and septic tanks to manually empty them, women and girls are more often involved in toilet cleaning (including dry latrine cleaning, a form of manual scavenging) sweeping streets, railways and sorting municipal waste (Bhakta et al., 2022).

Safai karamchari women are discriminated against, due to the fact that they are poor, Dalits and women. They are not only discriminated against by society and administrative systems at large, but also within their own communities where patriarchy persists. The legitimisation of manual scavenging into *safai karamcharis* working for municipal corporations also has

² Unpublished thesis, Jawaharlal Nehru University.

gendered dimensions through the preferential treatment or *Warsa Hakka* (usage in Marathi language, means hereditary in English) system (Kadlak et al, 2019) under which a *safai karamchhari* will nominate his wife, son/brother, unmarried or widowed daughter/sister, or any other dependent to fill his/her position upon retirement, death or permanent disability. Therefore, once forced to become the only breadwinner in the family, and being nominated by their husbands, most women have no choice but to continue to work as *safai karamcharis* (Mander et al., 2020)³. The issues of the women Safai Karamcharis remain unattended (Salve, Bansod, & Kadlak, 2017).

In 2017, a study of sanitation workers by Dalberg Advisors estimated there were nearly 5 million sanitation workers in India; of these 2.5 million face high occupational hazards and risks. About 45 per cent of sanitation workers work in urban areas. Nearly 50 per cent of urban sanitation workers are women, mostly engaged in school toilet cleaning.⁴ The National Commission for Safai Karmacharis (NCSK), National Safai Karamchhari Financial Development Corporation (NSKFDC) and Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) address the socio-economic and working rights of sanitation workers. Despite these numerous developmental and legal interventions, there continues to exist multi-layered systemic gaps, which keep the communities of sanitation workers in socio-economic marginalisation and deprivation (PRIA, 2019).⁵

Khan and Dassi (1999) in their study on *Valmiki* youth have examined the historical context, social structures, and economic conditions that have contributed to the community's marginalization. The central theme revolves around the socio-economic challenges faced by the Valmiki community and explores potential paths towards their rehabilitation and empowerment.

Based on the understanding of their own situation and condition, today the Dalit women's movement is organized around issues of access to livelihood and social needs, patriarchy, caste-based discrimination, and impunity for violence against Dalit women. In addition, Dalit women are seeking non-discriminatory access and affirmative action policies for political participation. These demands were put forth by Dalit women in a groundbreaking conference of the Dalit Women's Rights Forum at The Hague in a conference on the 'Human Rights and Dignity of Dalit Women in 2006.'⁶ It can be immensely empowering for the Dalit women as they would also have to stand up to men from their own caste who would be all too eager to speak 'for' them (Sabharwal and Sonalkar, 2015).

A primary-level study across 500 villages (Shah et al., 2006) on the forms and nature of violence indicated that across the states studied, harassment of Dalit women takes the following forms: non-Dalits frequently use abusive and derogatory language when addressing Dalit women; non-Dalits refer to Dalit women as prostitutes or use caste names; in their

³ Policy brief on "The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013" (undertaken by the Centre of Equity Studies, with support from Safai Karamchhari Andolan and WaterAid India, under the project 'Strengthening rule of law for advancing the rights and freedoms of manual scavengers in India', supported by the European Commission- European Instrument of Democracy and Human Rights).

⁴ The Sanitation Workers Project (<http://sanitationworkers.org>) was 5-month long study of sanitation workers across India carried out by Dalberg Advisors in 2017, with the support of The Gates Foundation.

⁵ Occasional Paper on: Lived Realities of Women Sanitation Workers in India.

⁶ Hague Conference Report: <<http://www.Dalits.nl/pdf/humanrightsDalitwomen.pdf>.

workplace or in the market, non-Dalit supervisors or traders will often make sexual innuendoes to Dalit women. Another study by Irudayam, Mangubhai and Lee (2014) of the narratives of 500 Dalit women across four states on the forms and manifestations of violence found that the most frequent forms of violence that are perpetrated against the majority of Dalit women are verbal abuse (62.4 percent), physical assault (54.8 percent), sexual harassment and assault (46.8 percent), domestic violence (43.0 percent), and rape (23.2 percent), in descending order (Sabharwal and Sonalkar, 2015).

The Dalits are the about 260 million people born into communities that face work and descent based discrimination, including untouchability and stigmatisation from caste or caste like systems globally. In India, they are the socially excluded communities outside the Hindu caste system who were formerly considered untouchable. In India, they are administratively classified as the Scheduled Castes (SC). The Scheduled Castes comprise 201,378,372 (16.6%) of India's 1.21 billion population. They are considered as 'lower' in status, ritually 'impure' and 'polluting' and thus isolated physically, socially and politically from other castes and communities of the society. They are subjected to a colossal amount of violence and atrocities, perpetuated by 'higher' status communities and the state. In addition to the gross violence, these communities are excluded from various public and private resources and services for development and welfare (Asia Dalit Rights Forum, 2017).

Present study

The present study seeks to understand the lived realities of *Valmiki* women in terms of the sanitation work that they perform and how the intersection of caste and gender has shaped the kind of struggles these women face. It attempts to understand both the structural and institutional factors that act as coercive elements in their lived realities within a post-colonial framework of development. It makes the power producing knowledge systems explicit consequently shifting the pivot of the problem from the body of the Dalit woman to that of systems which produce and reproduce such hierarchical identities. The study aims to deconstruct the factors that affect the nature and type of engagement and participation of the womenfolk in the sanitation work and the forms of coping mechanisms adopted by them to deal with this oppression induced by caste and gender.

The study has been conducted using the qualitative tenets of social science research. In-depth interviews have been conducted repeatedly with the participants of the study. Thick descriptions emerged at the point wherein, the semi-structured-ness of the interviews gradually took the shape of trust-based and carefree conversational interviews, thus producing feminist accounts from the eyes of the *Valmiki womenfolk* who have cried and danced in the process of data collection along with the researcher. Feminist friendships were formulated; however the researcher had to be conscious of ethics around controlled emotional involvement.

Traumas that Dalit women have faced due to intersectional realities are separate from that of men, they could not find a place in early literature as complete entities (Alam, 2021). The framework of intersectionality by Kimberley Crenshaw (1991) has been used to analyse the findings to formulate an understanding of the subjective realities of the Dalit women interviewed; whilst intertwining the same with the structural and institutional realities and demystifying the triple layers of caste, gender and working-class labour.

Dalit women have unique lived experiences, as this faction comprises of the intersectional oppressions of two groups oppressed on account of their birth: 'Dalits' and 'women'. Dalits in India are the 'depressed classes' (Ambedkar, 1936) and women 'the second sex' (Beauvoir, 1989). These doubly oppressed women are subjugated, downgraded, and marginalized. Hence the need to create a Dalit Feminist Standpoint has been identified by many researchers: Gopal Guru (1995), Sharmila Rege (1998) and Chhaya Datar (1999). The term 'outsider-within', first coined by Patricia Hill Collins (1986) shapes the perspective of the experiencer which locates a unique standpoint (Bhushan and Kumar, 2020).

While conducting open-ended interviews and following the tenets of qualitative research, researchers have encountered certain junctures wherein the respondents take 'power' over the narratives shared. The tool that one may have meticulously prepared might dissipate in the background as the accounts of the lived experiences shared may rise beyond what was initially expected. This makes this body of research essentially feminist in that the methodology is inclusive of the 'stand point' of those researched without at any point limiting their choice and freedom of expression. This is also a point wherein feminist friendships develop and break institutional power structures as the very manner and process in which the research is conducted erupts as democratic and dialogic.

Findings

The demographic profiling in the current descriptive study is inclusive of five female *Valmiki*⁷ sanitation workers employed at a public university in the urban spaces of Delhi. Data collected through in-depth interviews and observations around a continuous period, is indicative of a profiling of individuals aged (35-45) approximately who reside in mixed-community neighbourhoods (comprising diverse castes, religions, and socio-economic groups) residing particularly in joint family setups (for all five). Each participant earns approximately ₹15,000 per month as a supplementary income to their household, which typically includes contributions from other family members. All participants affirmed of belonging to the *Valmiki* community (a Scheduled Caste group historically associated with sanitation and manual labor roles). Three amongst the womenfolk are migrants from nearby neighbouring states who started living in Delhi as residents specifically after getting married. Migration to Delhi implied getting pulled into sanitation labour much in consonance with the preceding generations.

The data gathered was thematically analysed and major themes which emerged have been presented with the thick narrative bringing out lived experiences of women sanitation workers, their struggles, challenges, coping and finally the aspirations for the next generation. The article unravels a vivid description of six major themes that encapsulate this study namely- the dynamics between gender, caste & class, matters concerning health, aspects of agency, sexuality & marital relations of the womenfolk, the discrimination experienced, coping mechanisms, hopes & aspirations.

⁷ Belonging to the Scheduled Caste category for all matters pertaining to administrative purposes.

Revealing the dynamics between gender, caste and class through the ‘intersectional’ lens

Shano (name changed) from Hussainpur in the state of Uttar Pradesh addresses herself as belonging to the *kanchi* sub-caste amongst the *Valmiki*s whilst reiterating how the *thakurs* formulate the dominant caste category in the region.

“I belong to the *kanchi* sub-caste amongst the *Valmiki*s. The *Thakurs* are the dominant caste in Hussainpur, Uttar Pradesh.”

Whilst sharing certain memories from her childhood she used the words “*apna ghar, apni kheti, gehu aur bajra*” also explicitly indicating that her natal family was essentially land owning⁸.

That notwithstanding migration was consequential upon marriage as she affirmed “*endogamy is a crucial feature; after marriage, I had to migrate out of my village.*” Her reference to endogamy is a subtle yet firm reminder as to how caste regulates marriage, further entrenching her lived reality within the *Valmiki* community’s socio-economic constraints. Thereafter, the episode of post marriage, migration and entry into sanitation work is reflective of how Dalit women are often pushed into low-status, caste-based labour to support their families, a burden relatively less imposed on men of similar caste backgrounds. Most of the *Safai Karamcharis* working in cities are migrants from various parts of India (Daroker, 2009). The social, economic and cultural factors push them from their place of origin to various parts of the country.

The case of marriage prestations/payments paid to the groom’s family, (*dowry*), highlight how patriarchal practices at the intersection of caste further exacerbate the economic vulnerability of a particular caste group. Marriage prestations, a gendered expectation, located within the patriarchal institution of marriage strips a family of its assets, pushing them into a cycle of poverty and menial labour.

“Initially, my husband’s family and I lived in Bombay in our own house. But during my sister-in-law’s wedding, due to marriage prestations, we had to sell off the house. After that, my husband did menial ‘labour’ jobs.”

The aforementioned transition from a land-owning natal family to a working-class *Safai Karamchari* reflects a downward class mobility triggered by the loss of assets.

“My first salary was Rs 7000, and today my gross salary is Rs 15000.”

(She showed the researcher rashes and allergy marks on the lower portion of her wrists, visible as reddened marks on her dusky complexion, with a smile that faded quickly).

The narratives elicited through the open-ended interviews, centres the “standpoint” of the marginalized caste individuals, herein the *Valmiki* women further representative of various sub-castes (like the aforementioned *kanchi* sub-group of Uttar Pradesh). The structure and work in the case of Dalit women sanitation workers are debilitating their self-dignity and social mobility (Patil, 2024). Intersectionality, thus is revelatory of how caste, gender, and

⁸ Our own house, our own land, wheat and millet.

class identities intertwine to shape the experiences of the Dalit womenfolk across a plethora of issues like marriage, migration and the market.

On matters concerning health

A common occupational hazard that the womenfolk reported to have undergone (four out of five) is what they colloquially term broadly as '*rasoli*' (non-cancerous cysts or benign tumours). This can be a possible manifestation of the high exposure level to biological and chemical pollutants leading to conditions of poor menstrual hygiene and reproductive tract infections owing to the specific demands of the job as a sanitary worker. This in their language was very simplistically understood as exposure to *dhool-mitti*⁹. This further highlights the reproductive health vulnerabilities of this section of women owing to ignorance and lack of easy access to any quality health service at subsidised costs other than the University Health Centre. Thus, in the course of this paper, one of the significant finding has been closely related to the reproductive health aspects of the womenfolk.

On probed further and asked whether the contractual nature of the job accrues to them any health benefits considering they have been employed 'gainfully', they mention the University health centre wherein they are provided free basic level check-ups-

wahan jo lady doctor hain, woh kaafi achchi hain. unhone mujhe 'tablets' diye yeh kehte hue ki operation ki zaroorat nahi padegi.¹⁰

Another participant of the research study unapologetically complained as to how her senior made her work despite bringing to his notice the issue of *auroton ka masla*¹¹. She blatantly criticised the university policy that should be considerate of providing two days leave to non-celibate, non-menopausal, married women.

On probing further, they would suddenly display signs of discomfiture and distrust fearing the consequences of such open exhibit of disaffection towards the employer. On such occasions they would softly avoid any eye-contact and as one of the participants would claim-

main toh mata rani ki puja karti hoon. apne dharma ko maanney waali achchi aurat hoon aur ghoongat bhi karti hoon¹²

Discussions with the participants around the course of this research also brought to the forefront their conditions and motivation for work during the pandemic. One of the ladies said that although no PPE kits were provided to them, the authorities distributed clinical masks and sanitisers along with strict instructions pertaining to vaccination. They had to report to work once a week and would work in turns maintaining proper social distancing. The workload dropped considerably during the lock down but not in the hostel space where a handful of residents were living during the much uncertain times. Feelings of work related dissatisfaction was reported from amongst those *karamcharis* who were specifically working in the university hostel during the pandemic as it meant cleaning up of the close quarters of

⁹ Soil and dust.

¹⁰ The lady doctor at the centre is kind. She gave me tablets and said that a surgery won't be necessary.

¹¹ Women's problem.

¹² I am a believer of the goddess and follow my faith religiously. I am a pious woman in veil.

the in-mates often breaching the standards of social distancing that increased their vulnerabilities as front-line workers. However, it was affirmed that the university paid regular dues and there were no instances of lay-offs of any *safai karamcharis*. From one of the thick descriptions-

dar lagta tha aane jaane mein. mahol hi aisa tha. us time pe humse kam kaam karwate the. rishtedaar mar rahe the mahamari se. Mujhe toh kaam pe aake bhi kuch nahi hua. bas jab kaam se ghar pahuchti thi, toh dar laga rehta tha ki mere wajah se, mere bachcho ko kuch ho na jaye. mera beta meri bohot fikr karta tha.¹³

In the words of another one of the participants - *thodi bhi sardi zukhaam hoti, toh main bas paracetamol le leti*.¹⁴

Aspects of Agency, Sexuality and Marital Relations

Some initial excerpts that emanated from the semi-structured in-depth interviews and formulated specifically a narrative around aspects of sexuality of the female *safai karamcharis* in the University space can be presented as follows-

Kajal (name changed): Tell me one thing is it wrong or socially inappropriate when a married woman thinks of acting upon things that bring her personal happiness? Why is it seen as morally deviant behaviour when I formulate relationships with other men whereas my husband can do all, that he pleases including being physically abusive with me? I found Anis (name changed) on one of the social media platforms and have been interacting with him ever since. We became close friends and I have on one or two occasions even lent him money as I have developed a bond of trust with him. Once when I was in trouble at my in-laws' place he happened to telephonically speak with my husband and when my husband verbally abused him, he retorted back "dum hain to kuch kar ke dikha"¹⁵ All one needs is love Madam and is it wrong, is it wrong (breaks down)? I very well understand that nobody cares about my well-being; therefore I have kept some savings from my salary as a cushion to fall back upon during rainy days. He (husband) continues to have multiple affairs online with other women!

In yet another one on the in-depth interviews (on being pativrata¹⁶ and powerless)-

Sama (name changed): I am a Krishna bhakt¹⁷ and whatever day-to-day acts I partake in is essentially with one singular emotion of divine prem¹⁸. However, many a times in my marriage with my husband (with whom I have been extremely loyal), what I get to experience is completely the opposite – humiliation, harassment, control and coercion. Last night he was stinking like a pig, his mouth was giving out the most repugnant smell possible- that of alcohol and even after so many years of marriage, he tried to force

¹³ The situation during the pandemic was one of utmost fear. We were given less tasks by the authorities. The relatives were dying but nothing happened to me despite me coming to work. My only concern was that my family shouldn't be affected because of me. My son (20 years old) used to worry about me a lot.

¹⁴ In case of even minor cold and cough I would take a dose of paracetamol.

¹⁵ If you have the guts, come and stop us!

¹⁶ Obedient to one's husband.

¹⁷ A devotee of *Krishna*, one of the many Hindu Gods.

¹⁸ Love.

himself over me. Right now as I am at my place of work and in this scorching Delhi heat, my body still carries last night's ghastly memory with unbearable pain in my abdomen! He knows very well that I suffer from a poor reproductive health. Yet his beastly advances continue whenever he gets drunk! It gets very embarrassing in front of my son too! He says "mummy, aap mere kamre mein so jaiye"¹⁹. My husband says man banaya kar²⁰; how can I when such episodes have no iota and scope of love-making? What is there to desire anyway?

On harassment at the job place-

Soni (name changed): Ever since I have been appointed to work at the Centre, it has been a huge relief. Initially when I was working at the girls' hostel, the work load was double than this and due to a shortage in staff and 24*7 demand for work, the work conditions remain pathetic and the wage insufficient. Although I have been transferred to work in this Centre, my sister is still working at the girls' hostel and is having a tough time. The treatment received from the senior officials at the hostel is humiliating, belittling and un-dignifying. No self-respecting person would wish to work there. Keedey makouron ki tarah pesh aate hain.²¹

On experiencing 'hidden hate' often subtle yet exposing tacit and repressive codes of conduct

Sama: The truth is people cannot stand to see a poor woman dressing up well to her work-place with make-up and colourful salwar kameez.²² These people get especially envious whenever I wear maroon and especially detest me for wearing the Krishna tikka.²³ A few keep on asking me as to how exactly I have been taking care of my skin as it glows naturally. I tell them it is due to my bhakti²⁴. One slightly senior employee in another one of the previous Departments where I was initially working used to stare at me and wanted to have physical relations with me. It is my deliberation that he must have even tried to sway and seduce me using spell work because of which my skin turned pale for quite some time and even developed acne marks. Woh mujhe pana chahta tha.²⁵

Experiencing discrimination

The Oxford dictionary defines the word *discrimination* as a practice wherein one group is treated less fairly than the other often on the basis of different typologies and hierarchies of social stratification. The *Valmiki* womenfolk interviewed through the course of this study shared instances of experiencing discriminatory and biased attitudes and behaviours both in the public and private domains of their lived realities.

¹⁹ Mother, you can sleep in my room.

²⁰ Try to make up your mind for sex.

²¹ They behave with us as if we are petty ants and spiders!

²² An Indian attire consisting of two pieces –shirt/tunic and loose pants.

²³ A decorative mark adorned on the forehead by *Krishna bhakts*.

²⁴ Devotion to God.

²⁵ He wanted me at any cost.

Within the public space which in this case is also their workplace, the primary account on which self reported episodes of discrimination have emerged in the form of thick descriptions from the womenfolk's narratives majorly pinpoint to the aspect of occupational hierarchy; the fact that they were women the second major moot aspect and women belonging to the *Valmiki* caste group only later to the first two (on the basis of the words that the respondents specifically used in order to answer the set of interview questions). This meant that institutional scenarios of discrimination were more immediate and urgent and preceded the structural factors of alleged discrimination patterns as per the participants' analysis of their situation. For instance one amongst them shared that she "cannot stand the *chaprasi* of the department who doesn't even have the brains to distinguish which task is meant to be done by exactly whom". This was in reference to the matter of cleaning of dustbins and cleaning-cloths particularly i.e. she argued with emphasis that the division of labor at the work place should be strictly delineated.

She thereafter mentioned that the washing of the *gamlas* is a very tedious task and the "men can atleast be sensitive that a woman might find it difficult to even lift the heavy weight". She further explained passionately arguing that the moment she is done cleaning a dustbin, that very second the *chaprasi* would spit on it. She questioned his act of spitting that she deciphered as uncivil as a behavioural trait per se and secondly as a code of conduct, disrespectful towards her. Her simplistic expectation was that if in case the tasks could not be clearly demarcated as per the designation, couldn't she be respected on the basic edifice of being a woman atleast? Or, in this case was she being disrespected because and *only* because she was a woman; the ubiquitous 'second sex' or if not just that, then possibly as a woman representative of a particular cultural/religious group within a predominant institutional culture?

When it comes to a resolution of such concerns at the workplace, the question herein in the 21st century post-colonial university space was definitely not about if she 'could' and 'would' speak; it was more so about if she was being heard and if so, by whom? Speaking up definitely also was not un-constitutive of specific consequences like loss of the job itself which she couldn't "afford". Adhering to silence herein is not just a normative quality or positive attribute of a 'good' woman but a consequence of tacit civic blackmailing, bullying and abuse as someone being taken advantage of just because of the existence of legitimate power i.e. authority over and above her at the work place as a *Valmiki, female, safai-karamchari*.

The treatment that they were meted out, at work of which the authorities would sometimes be oblivious towards possibly owing to questionable civil and social sensibilities and sensitivities that many a times is replete with the potential to enter the category of behaviours that can translate as 'cruelty' was elaborated upon point by point with both precision and pain. For instance one amongst the respondents found it quite humiliating when she would be rudely asked to vacate a chair that she sat on making her realise her 'polluting' position and presence. She further argued-

mere bare mein bhool jati hain madam. non-veg nahi khati hoon toh kuch chota sa mithai toh mangwa sakti hain na jab sab log dawat ke liye ekatha ho rahe ho toh.

The matter of commensality at the workplace was a vehemently 'felt' point on the basis of which reference was made to the 'madam' or head of the department/centre as 'good' or 'bad'. For instance, whilst conducting another one of the interviews, the respondent nodded

and smiled about the apparent compassion of her boss as she would get *samosa*, *kachori* and *mithai* for the *karamcharis* on special occasions.

In another one of the candid revelations, one of the *karamcharis* blurted out with much emotion that once when she asked for a leave due to a case of demise in her family the ‘provost’ overwhelmingly said - “*apni shakal le ke dafa ho jao*”. This unfortunately and glaringly exposes the working conditions and plausible trauma that precarity and contractual engagements/jobs entail. Of course, this albeit a moot aspect, is not the only one at the intersection of work/labour with gender and caste as indelible structural factors of oppression.

In the domestic/private sphere, one of the *karamcharis* expressed a situation of domestic violence (physical, verbal and emotional) that was meted out to her at her patrilocal residence due to as she opined, ‘lack of any support from her natal family’. In one of the interview sessions she broke down profusely and with tears mentioned how even her husband’s cousins did not hesitate whilst subjecting her to persistent cruelty, shaming and humiliation. She later contacted the researcher on her own during the multiple sessions of in-depth data collection process to inform with gathered confidence how during one of the instances she had dialled 100 and called on the local police to rescue her out of the situation. Apparently, the local police gave a warning to the in-laws and she was made to submit a written record/complaint of the domestic situation. She now waves at and shows a ‘thumbs-up’ to the researcher during casual encounters in the University, perhaps symbolically indicating an amelioration of the situation.

On coping mechanisms

The coping mechanisms that this particular group of *safai karamcharis* were observed to be adopting can broadly be categorised into two types- emotion-focussed coping and problem focused coping as revealed during the course of the in-depth conversations (Lazarus and Folkman, 1984).

It is indicative from the data gathered that under the first type of coping which the womenfolk resorted to, religion and positive reframing (of course with no conscious strategising) as a means to while away their states of emotional and psychological turmoil at the intersection of the personal and professional spheres of their lived realities was commonplace. Herein, a wholehearted mention needs to be made of one amongst the five closely studied respondents who was explicitly immersed in *bhakti* consciousness or *krisna* consciousness which can be located within the Hindu tradition as an alternative means to the mainstream ways in which Hinduism is generally practised. Adorned everyday with a *chandan tika*²⁶ on her forehead, she shared that many a times external manifestations of the internal faith that a worker may follow/subscribe to especially as a minority community within a majoritarian institutional structure is inherent with the potential to alienate/isolate the individual. Herein, the context gets problematised as the very coping formula, herein, religion, that the person subscribes to for all matters pertaining to battling psychological crests and troughs, ends up alienating the person further within a predominant institutional culture. What is noticeable is the fact that during such circumstance that is sufficient to arouse within a person moments of inner conflict or dilemma, the person holds on to her faith with greater conviction and affectuality with pronounced emotional fervour deeming it even more precious than during ordinary life

²⁶ Decorative and symbolic design drawn with sandalwood.

situations. It then solidifies from a mere coping strategy into a form of conscientisation that a person comes to passionately identify with.

This was visible in a moment of trance like dance that the respondent performed continuously for approximately ten to fifteen minutes whilst putting away her footwear despite the scorching floor on a summer afternoon within the University space in a teacher's chamber as she sang along- *hare krisna, hare krisna*. During one of the many interactions, in-fact she was distinctly low in spirits as she complained that due to her son taking away the mobile phone from her, she had no other means and resources to listen to her daily *bhajans*.²⁷

In exemplifying the second type of coping, that is social coping what was most conspicuous was an illustration shared by one of the respondents as it breached the stereotype of a troubled and 'power' based daughter-in-law and mother-in-law relationship within a patriarchal, patrilocal frame of reference of the 'joint family'. One of the respondents expressed that she shared a much deeper bond with her mother-in-law than her husband as in the capacity of a married working woman it was her mother-in-law who shared with her the household labour expected normatively of the married womenfolk of the family/household. Herein, a friendship emanated that was seen to shackle notions of 'emphasised femininity' (that is culturally seen to pit women against each other in order to have a meagre share of pie that patriarchy would offer to them in their capacity of elderly, next generation women who 'have seen and borne it all'). However, it needs to be mentioned that this was only one amongst the other cases in point and mention of apparent domestic abuse by one of the other mother-in-laws have also been arrived at in the course of the research. Although exceptions don't form the rule, the possibilities of a harmonious coexistence emanated as one of the significant findings in understanding the day-to-day lived realities of the female *safai karamcharis*- their personal and the political. Herein, the support of a mother-in-law within the context of an Indian joint family set up is seen to relieve the daughter-in-law of the herculean task of 'balancing' the domestic and the un-domestic.

Of hopes and aspirations: "My sons won't be doing the same jobs"

Another interesting theme that emanated across all five interviews is the subject of mobility. These womenfolk were economically self-reliant, that which can be placed within the specific discourse of an *atma-nirbhar* married woman and positioned theoretically across the contours of women in development, women and development as well as gender and development. This can further be understood within two nuanced categories from data that emerged from the *field*- one, who would hope that she be considered for the meagre and minimum share of respect in a marriage owing to the fact that she is an equal contributor and stakeholder (if not more); second, who considered her occupation as an active life changing event, in that she vowed not to engage the coming generations into similar types of jobs endemic amongst the *Valmiki* inhabitants of the city i.e. from a historically defined caste position to an aspirational class which is definitive of their migration pattern from the rural to the urban. They seldom were seen to hold onto their caste position sentimentally in the present reality and were observed to be aspiring rather *achchi naukri* for their next generations.

Quite simplistically then, their route to 'upward mobility' was sought through breaching of erstwhile occupational ghettoisation of particular castes through the 'class' route within a

²⁷ Songs in praise of the lord.

neoliberal context of state driven development contexts. Their government jobs ensured their exposure to a world that has enabled the womenfolk to dream of their sons gleaming future prospects. One amongst the five women specifically engaged with the researchers in searching for ‘internship’ opportunities for her son who currently is pursuing graduation in Social Work and is enrolled in another public University.

Sonu *didi* for instance in the course of the interaction of fieldwork would call incessantly for such opportunities for her son and hoped-

aap naukri dilaane mein madad kar dena. Main toh chahti hoon ki woh aage aur padhai kare aur MSW bhi kare. Woh bohot hi honhar hain.

Upward class mobility herein is sought through education that would open the window to an entire array of possibilities. However, it was distinctly observable that mention was made of the career prospects of the next generation only in cases where the women bore sons indicating towards a conspicuous silence on the future of the *Valmiki* daughters.

In one of the interviews, one of the womenfolk opined:

woh to videsh jaayega. Middle east jana chahta hain aur jayega; maine jo kaam kiya woh mera beta nahi karega. Main toh padhi likhi nahi hoon toh kar liya.

A seminal question remains that of whether the next generation of *Valmiki* women would continue to be engaged in similar occupation like their grandmothers and mothers whilst the *Valmiki* boys shackle hegemonic occupational barriers defined by caste-based ascribed identities gradually but surely.

Discussion

From an intersectional and Dalit feminist standpoint, the *safai karamcharis*’ experiences reveal the effects of caste, gender, and class oppression, manifesting in occupational health risks, workplace discrimination, and domestic violence. Yet, their agency through economic independence, religious devotion, and aspirations for mobility is demonstrative of resilience and resistance.

A major endeavour of this study has been to bring to the ‘centre’ the voices of the *Valmiki* womenfolk from the peripheries/margins. The primary concerns and subjects of discussion following chiefly the social work principles of researchers’ controlled emotional involvement, respondents’ self-determination and the principle of confidentiality facilitated the collation of in-depth data that was found inconspicuous in the hitherto existing research studies. The womenfolk spoke to formulate narratives that was framed across a multiplicity of themes looked at from their *standpoint*.

The health issues and occupational hazards that the sample affirmed to have faced in the course of the study, is indicative of the limited attention on the part of the employers to such concerns. Their lack of awareness that many a times gets reflected through practices such as self-medication just to cite one instance reflects limited accessibility to a comprehensive health apparatus, the risk of which increased manifold during the pandemic (Covid-19).

When looked at from the point of the lens of intersectionality and a feminist standpoint, gender insensitivities at the workplace tantamount to facing prejudices and humiliation from

senior officials and authorities set the premise for understanding the case of the womenfolk in terms of their positioning in the caste hierarchy and within the neo-liberal context as working class women. The coping mechanisms ranging from superstition to silence is reflective of their state of mind marked by pain and stigma at the juxtaposition of structural and institutional factors.

Their expression of sexuality to mark their resistance further vilifies and assassinates the moral 'character' of the Dalit women as she 'dares' to formulate friendships with men outside the marriages only to be shown her place through severe instances of domestic violence and marital discord as the Dalit men who they are married to remain unanswerable about their patterns of infidelity. Whatever little monetary savings they manage as a buffer for uncertain times is their only respite offered by their capacity as 'working Dalit women' in that it emanates as one of the very few socio-economic realities that mark their context with hope and optimism.

The narrative thus carved out at the intersection of a triple layered marginalisation (gender, caste and class) is one fuelled by structural constraints (patriarchy, caste hierarchy and so on) and their access to limited 'agency' provided by their institutional/workplace affiliation, in this case a public University space that is un-sanitised by its own particularistic forms of discrimination (contractual labour, poor treatment/exclusionary behaviour and so on). The result of such a sociological premise is their poor state of mental health that needs immediate and urgent attention as they 'cope' through with the socio-economic and psychological dimensions of today's migrant Dalit women in the urban spaces.

Conclusion

The researchers wanted to highlight the tenacity of female sanitation workers employed in a public university in Delhi. Using a narrative inquiry and a thematic narrative analysis of the data gathered, we concluded that women sanitation workers at the public university have a number of positive outcomes, chief among them being their hopes for a better future for the next generation, even though they face daily obstacles and lead modest lives in the city.

The Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 was enacted to prevent the commission of offences of atrocities against the members of the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes. In 2015, certain amendments were brought which recognised acts of violence against SC/ST women as atrocities, thus recognising the aggravated intersectional discrimination faced by Dalit women (Kothari et al., 2020). However, the structural and institutional instances of discrimination faced by the womenfolk at the intersection of gender, caste, class and labour continue unabated in the present day.

Using a narrative method, this research study intended to provide a understanding of the issues that the employees in the University space were facing, how they perceived and assessed the issues, how they handled them, and what inspired and encouraged them to persevere through the challenges. We were able to thoroughly examine each employee's unique experiences as well as their common and divergent viewpoints in an in-depth and thick fashion. It did, however, force us to limit the study to a small, non-representative sample size with little room for generalization. With follow-up interviews and communication with the participants to elucidate and enhance the stories, the study can be repeated in the future with a larger, gender-equitable sample. It is also possible to go deeper into the role of caste, poverty, and their community. This study is among the first few to use a narrative approach to examine

the resilience of female sanitation workers in India. It challenges the notion that resilience in a community or its members is a positive outcome in and of itself. Perhaps the most significant lesson for scholars and decision-makers to learn from this is that the mindset of the people of India, not the tenacity of its labour force, is the key to solving the country's sanitation issues.

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