

Urban Sanitation and Caste: Voices and Experiences of Sanitation Workers in Bhubaneswar City, Odisha

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Abstract: Based on a qualitative study, the paper captures the experiences and voices of sanitation workers on how caste and state policies of contractual labour intersect and influence their life chances and the exploitation they suffer at the hands of employers in Bhubaneswar city, Odisha. A total of 110 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with sanitation workers employed by BMC and private contractors. The neo-liberal policies of the state have led to the privatisation of sanitation services, where SCs are forced to work on a contractual basis at a minimal wage of 125-150 INR per day for long hours, and lack access to safety gears when entering into manholes. In Bhubaneswar, caste relations in terms of ritual status and hierarchy operate in subtle ways. The paper highlights that 80 per cent of sanitation workers suffer stigma, untouchability, discrimination, and injuries at the work sites. The study's findings suggest that a complex power relationship exists between the state and sanitation work, which tends to encourage manual scavenging despite the availability of machines/technology. The paper concludes that state governments and local bodies must pay heed to the issues and voices of sanitation workers to address caste-based discrimination; provide job tenure with decent wages; and access to comprehensive health insurance. The paper contends that it is pertinent to delineate the caste-based hierarchy, occupation, and stigma that are naturalised and remain hidden in the narrative of the city development, where cities are made smart at the cost of marginalised bodies.

Keywords: sanitation workers; work experience; occupational health; social vulnerability; urban sanitation; local bodies

Introduction

Traditionally, the lower castes, also known by the constitutional term Schedule Castes (SCs), were forced to skin dead animals, dispose of corpses, remove human excreta, and attend to cremation grounds. Even after 78 years of Independence and modernisation in the country, the strong ties of caste and occupation are clearly evident in sanitation work. Amongst the SCs, a large section of the Valmiki caste remains tied to sanitation work. According to research in Gujarat, 2.5% of the population works in sanitation, with the Valmiki caste accounting for the majority of workers (Drawin, 2014). They are considered 'untouchable amongst the untouchables'. Various caste names, such as Bhangi, Chuhra, Mehtar, Mazhabi, Lal Begi, and Halalkhor are used to denote them. In the eastern part of the country, these are known as Har, Hadi, Hela, Dom, and Sanei, Mukhiyar, Thoti, Chachati, Pakay, and Relli. A total of 1,80,657 sanitation workers are working across India, as per the 2011 socio-economic

caste census (Ghosh, 2017). In urban areas, 98 % of sanitation workers belong to SC communities (Desai & Kulkarni, 2008).

Traditionally, caste Hindus denied lower castes all the basic human rights and prohibited them from owning land, property, accessing education, and changing their occupation (Thorat and Joshi, 2020). Caste based discrimination is so rampant in India that Rangnath Misra Commission, 2009 declared that, "the caste system should be recognised as a general social characteristic of ... Indian society as a whole, without questioning whether the philosophy and teachings of any particular religion recognise it or not" (Ministry of Minority Affairs, 2009: 153–54, cited in Mosse, 2020). Stigma and practice of untouchability stems from caste Hindus, as they show disdain towards lower castes and manual work, which is seen as unclean, physically, and ritually polluting in nature. The practice of untouchability is one of the most inhuman characteristics of the caste system. It denies Dalits the most fundamental dignity of human existence. Studies show that the practice of untouchability is prevalent in rural and urban India in various forms (Kornberg, 2019; Thorat and Joshi, 2020).

The caste oppression continues in sanitation work in various forms. Despite the availability of technology and machines, municipal bodies, railways, and private companies force SCs to engage in manual scavenging and enter manholes without protective gear (Khatarker, 2025). According to the 2011 census, there are 794,390 dry latrines in India where human beings, predominantly Dalit women, eliminate human excreta (Joy and Bhagat, 2016). Data shows that approximately 1.2 million SCs still work as manual scavengers, out of which 98% are women who clean dry latrines, dispose of post-delivery placenta, endure social scorn and sexual harassment (Kumar and Preet, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Tandon and Basu, 2016). In a response to a parliamentary question in 2024 about the number of deaths during sewer and septic tank cleaning, the Ministry of Social Justice and Employment reported a total of 419 deaths during the last five years (GoI, 2024). However, data collected by Safai Karmchari Andolan estimates that approximately 339 manual scavengers died during 2022-23 (Fathima, 2024).

The present qualitative study seeks to capture the lived experiences of sanitation workers and examine how caste, informal labour arrangements, and state policies intersect to shape their experiences in Bhubaneswar city. The paper also highlights that state policies and caste-based power work in tandem to mask the caste-based discrimination, oppression, and illness suffered by SC sanitation workers. The paper consists of three parts: the first part discusses the literature on caste inequalities and sanitation work in urban areas. The Second part describes the methodology and lived experiences of sanitation workers in Bhubaneswar. The last section discusses findings and conclusion.

City, caste, and residential segregation: research evidence

Complex caste-power relations and hierarchies in both cities and villages marginalise Dalits. In rural parts of the country, caste-based rules are explicitly enforced, including residential segregation, prohibitions on SCs from participating in village festivals, and restrictions on temple entry (Chanchal and Lenka, 2023; Ranganathan, 2022). The nexus between state and caste Hindus has forced SCs into landlessness, debt-bonded labour, and agrarian slavery by the dominant castes (Ranganathan 2022). Prasad (2001) argues that Indian cities show signs of both departure and retention of complex caste-based agrarian relationships. Highlighting the transportation of caste-based inequalities in urban areas, Konda (2020) argues that "caste

hierarchies and identities of the marginalised do not disappear in cities" (cited in Ranganathan, 2022:5), rather these are further reinforced.

In cities, caste manifests itself in subtle ways, affecting the everyday experiences of SC communities. The socio-cultural patterns of caste-based discrimination and the notions of purity and pollution also regulate people's behaviour in cities (Jodhka and Newman, 2007; Mohanty and Dewivedi, 2019). Hiring practices of employment agencies, such as government and national and multinational private companies, remain deeply rooted in the traditional caste-based hierarchy in cities (Jodhka and Newman, 2007; Siddique, 2008; Thorat and Attewell, 2007; Walters, 2019). Based on a study of recruitment patterns in Delhi, Jodhka and Newman (2007) argue that recruitment in national and multinational companies depends on the caste and regional background of candidates, disguised in the language of merit. Walters (2019) highlights that education has failed to provide occupational mobility to children of sanitation workers in both rural and urban Karnataka. Rao (2013), in a study of caste-based discrimination in an elite higher education institution in Delhi, found that students from SC and ST communities suffer stigma and humiliation on an everyday basis inside as well as outside the classroom.

Cities are marked by socio-economic segregation where 70 % of the labouring population, mostly SCs, STs and OBCs, live in slums (Najman, 2010). Studies show that real estate-led development and land grab in cities is also an institutionalised form of caste-based discrimination. SCs and STs are easily dispossessed of their land/homes (Nambissan, 2021; Ranganathan, 2022). The colloquial term *jhuggi-jhopri/basti* is used to denote the slums in cities. In cities, caste, power, and domination operate in subtle ways where slums are often termed as illegal settlements and the residents face constant threat of eviction (Balsamanta and Reddy, 2018; Bhan, 2014). The constant outmigration of SCs and other marginalised populations to urban areas resulted in 'institutionalisation of unjust geographies' (Nambissan, 2021), lacking basic amenities, and particular meanings and stigma are attached to its residents. The dominant upper castes occupy greener, well-planned residential spaces with access to piped water and other amenities (Bhan, 2014; Ranganathan, 2022).

Studies show that urban segregation is part of social stratification, in which Dalit settlements are officially classified as Harijan basti/colony, and are known by specific caste names, such as Valmiki colony and Javat basti (Dupont, 2004; Kamble, 2002; Vivek, 2000). These settlements remain socially ostracised and excluded from the city planning and provision of basic facilities (Dupont, 2004). In an ethnographic study of slums in Angul and Dhenkanal in Odisha, Mohanty and Dewivedi (2019) found that some slums are exclusively populated by SCs, while in mixed-caste slums, Dalits have separate hamlets. The residents practice untouchability, and those from the sweeper caste are seen as the lowest among SCs. Shamlal (1992) conducted a study in Jodhpur on the Bhangi caste. The study found that the Bhangis are in sanitation work and occupy a low position. They are forced to live in isolated places and denied access to public facilities such as public wells, schools, hotels, temples, and common sitting places. Vivek (2000) in his study found that in Mumbai, sanitation workers remain neglected and suffer from illiteracy, impoverished living conditions, poor health, and financial constraints.

City and sanitation work: entangled caste-class relations

Caste is the central structure of Hindu society based on material inequalities emanating from disproportionate acquisition of natural resources as well as appropriation of lower caste labour

by caste Hindus. Ambedkar (1916:19/31) argues, "Caste is an enclosed class" "where classes have become castes through imitation and excommunication". Restriction on changing of occupations within enclosed classes created conditions where occupation was tied with caste and became hereditary. Scholars argue that caste is not merely a matter of cultural belief in notions of purity and pollution. It is related to material and social inequality. Moss (2018) argues that institution of caste has undergone significant changes in the neoliberal era. Some aspects of caste hierarchy are loosened while some are reinforced by the labour market arrangements and state policies. Mosse (2018) further argues that Caste Hindus create façade of castelessness and effortlessly claim the accumulated caste privileges in market and non-market contexts. The market, which appears 'free', is controlled by caste and kinship ties, where access to capital and networks facilitates the success of caste Hindus. The entry of subordinate groups into trade and commerce is fiercely guarded against (Mosse, 2018; Jodhaka, 2010).

Focusing on the tacit caste, occupation, and power relations, Ranganathan (2022) argues that in urban areas, there is a recalibration of caste power in which menial work is relegated to the lowest of the lower castes. While some SCs were able to move out of traditional occupations and enter non-manual work. A major section of the Dalit population, particularly the Valmiki caste, has failed to attain class status through occupational mobility in urban areas. Ganguly (2018), in a study on the Balmiki caste in central Delhi, found that occupational diversity among younger respondents (aged 25 to 29) is evident. They remain employed in the informal sector of the economy, which is irregular and low-paying. In comparison, older men (40 years and above) and women are engaged in sanitation work, such as sweeping, and serve as sanitation inspectors in municipal bodies. Walter (2019) also reports that children of sanitation workers are unable to enter non-manual employment and, under distress, join sanitation work in urban areas.

Various studies show the perpetuation of low socio-economic status among the scheduled castes in urban areas (Ramachandran, 1989; Kosambi, 1994; Gill, 1987; Sinha, 1984; Kumar and Venkateshwarlu, 1980). In terms of wage earnings, a significant gap is found between the Dalit and Non-Dalit groups. Arabsheibani et al. (2018) and Madheswaran and Attewell (2007), using national sample survey data, found caste-based income gaps across social groups. Female sanitation workers are paid lower wages than men in both government and private sectors (Kalaiyarasan and Kumar, 2014). D'Souza (1990) found that workers belonging to particular scheduled castes are paid lower wages in the informal sector in urban areas. There is ample literature on caste and sanitation work in the Indian context. However, at the regional level, in the context of Bhubaneswar city, Odisha, only a handful of studies explore issues of caste, sanitation work, and the status of workers. The present paper seeks to bridge this gap and examines how labour arrangements and state policies shape sanitation workers' lived experiences through an intersectional lens.

Sanitation work, caste, and lived experiences: An intersectional perspective

A complex, multi-layered relationship exists between state policies, caste, gender, and sanitation work. First of all, caste-based graded inequality is deeply rooted in sanitation services (Acharya, 2017), where Dalits have to deal with the filth. The present paper uses critical social theory and the lens of intersectionality to understand how sanitation workers' experiences and life chances are shaped by caste, informal labour arrangements, and state policies in Bhubaneswar city. Critical social theory grounded in theories of production relations and cultural subordination is useful for exploring the complex interconnections

between caste, class, and gender (Velaskar, 2016). It accounts for key differences between caste-gender and occupation relations in sanitation service provision in urban areas.

The continuation of the traditional mode of sanitation derives its legitimacy from the traditional structure of caste hierarchies, where caste Hindus relegated lower castes to the defiling work of sanitation (Khataker, 2025). It is also important to note that, despite the availability of machines/technology, state and private contractors can force Dalits to continue manual scavenging. In this context, Khataker (2025:358) argues that "in the caste system, lower castes are considered technologies of sanitation meant to eliminate dirt and human waste for the relief of the upper caste" at negligible cost.

Research method and field setting

The present paper is a part of a larger qualitative study conducted for a doctoral thesis. The study is located in two slums of Bhubaneswar city, where the majority of sanitation workers reside. Purposive sampling is to collect the data. The data is collected in two phases. The first phase consisted of a household survey. In the second phase, households with at least one family member engaged in sanitation work were contacted for in-depth interviews. Data is collected through semi-structured interviews, case studies, and Focus Group Discussions (FGD) to understand the experiences and voices of sanitation workers in Bhubaneswar city. A total of 110 in-depth interviews were conducted at the convenience of the workers at their homes. The participation in the study was voluntary. All interviews are conducted in the Odiya language. The duration of interviews was 50-60 minutes.

The in-depth interview focused on understanding how the caste and state policy of contractual employment leads to exploitation of their labour and forces them to enter manholes without any protective gear. It also discusses sanitation workers' awareness of contractors' and officers' corrupt practices and their fight against them. Pseudonyms are used to protect respondents' identities. The data is analysed using coding and arranged into themes to understand sanitation workers' lived experiences of discrimination and exploitation. It also focuses on workers' struggle to claim sanitation labour and rightful wages.

There are a total of 43 slum settlements, of which 73% are officially classified as unauthorised. The slum settlements house approximately 36% of the city's population (Anand and Deb, 2017). Two slums with a higher proportion of sanitation workers were selected for the study. One slum called Naharakanta is located 10 km away from the city. It is an authorised slum. The other studied slum, Bhimpur-Kela Sahi (an unauthorised slum), is within 2 km. range of city centre. The studied slums are residentially segregated, where SCs live in separate hamlets.

Socio-economic and demographic profile of the sanitation workers

Table 1 shows the socio-demographic profile of the respondents. Data shows that the majority of sanitation workers (98%) belong to the SC community. More than 50 % are from the 'Harijan' sub-caste, 26 % from the 'Hadi', and 12 % from the Naik sub-caste. According to the data, female workers account for a higher percentage (54%) than male (45%). Table 1 shows that 40% of workers are 25 to 35 years old, while 36% are between 35 and 45 years old. The sanitation workers have a low level of education. Only 37% have completed middle school, and only 22% who completed primary schooling. A significant proportion of workers (24%)

are illiterate. The majority of sanitation workers (74%) are married, approximately 14% are unmarried, while 12% are separated or divorced (Table 1).

Table 1: Socio-demographic profile of the sanitation workers

Gender	
Male	50 (45.5)
Female	60(54.5)
Age Group	
<25 Years	11(10.0)
25-34 Years	44(40.0)
35-44 Years	40(36.4)
45-54 Years	13(11.8)
55< Years	2(1.8)
Social Identity	
SC	108(98.2)
ST	2(1.8)
Sub Caste	
No response	7(6.4)
Harijan	60(54.5)
Hadi	29(26.4)
Naik	14(12.7)
Education attended	
No education	27 (24.5)
Primary School	22 (20.0)
Middle school	41 (37.3)
Matriculation	9 (8.2)
Intermediate	5 (4.5)
Graduation and above	6 (5.5)
Marital status	

Married	81 (73.6)
Unmarried	15 (13.6)
Separated/Divorce/Divorcee	14 (12.7)
Family composition	
Nuclear	98(89.1)
Joint	12(10.9)
Total	110(100.0)

Source: Fieldwork data

Migration and sanitation workers

The majority of SCs remain landless and migrate to urban areas in search of livelihood. Ranganathan (2022) argues that state policies and caste power work in hidden ways in urban areas, where lower-value labour is further shifted to lesser-valued bodies. Recent SC migrants from rural areas with no or limited education and skills take whatever work they can find. Table 2 provides reasons for migration cited by respondents. The data shows that 63.6% of workers migrated from rural areas. Around 66% of workers reported migrating to the city in search of better job opportunities. The city provides a relatively better life. The respondents said there are opportunities to get employed in non-farm activities that are relatively better paid and 'regular' compared to seasonal agricultural work.

Table 2: Migration and reasons for migration of sanitation workers

Migration From	N (%)
Non-Migrants	(3)2.7
Rural	(70)63.6
Urban	(37)33.6
Reasons for Migration	
Non-Migrants	3(2.7)
Got/ Expectation of job	41(43.6)
Better work opportunity	26(23.6)
Relatives staying in place of Destination/because of marriage	2 (1.8)
Crop failure/Natural calamity at the place	(.9)
Multiple Reasons	30 (27.3)
Total	110(100.0)

Source: Fieldwork data

Living conditions in the slums studied

The majority of the houses in the area are in poor condition and kutcha; only a few are semi-pucca. More than 50% of the workers live in a single room; only 32% reported having two kutcha rooms with no ventilation. No separate space is available for cooking. It is important to note that even in the slums; the majority of the migrant workers (66%) are living on rent. The room rent in the slum varies from Rs. 1000 to Rs. 2000 per month. Approximately 20% of respondents said that the monthly rent is Rs. 500-1000. Given the poor economic conditions, approximately 76% of sanitation workers use wood and coal main cooking fuel. Only 15% of households reported using a kerosene stove for cooking. Only two of the respondents used an LPG cylinder.

The two studied slums do not differ in terms of access to basic facilities such as water and sanitation. Data shows that the majority of households (82%) access water from public taps at standposts. A few households (6%) access water from municipal tankers, tube wells (5%), and taps (5%). More than half of households (63%) lacked access to toilet facilities and practiced open defecation. Only 37% of households had toilet facilities without running water at the time of data collection.

Work profile of sanitation workers

The respondents are working for the Bhubaneswar Municipal Corporation (BMC) and private contractors providing sanitation services in Bhubaneswar city. It is pertinent to note that the majority of workers (81%) are hired on a temporary basis by both government and private contractors. Another 17% of workers reported working for various NGOs involved in water supply and sanitation work.

More than half of the sanitation workers (58%) are engaged in cleaning the roads/streets and garbage collection. Another 38% of workers are engaged in all types of water supply and sanitation work, such as garbage collection, road cleaning, drainage cleaning, and manual scavenging. A small proportion of workers (4 percent) are involved in collecting biomedical waste.

Contractualisation and caste-based marginalisation: lived experiences of sanitation workers

The effect of the state's neoliberal policies is evident in terms of the number of working days per month. More than 71% of workers have to work 25 to 26 days in a month. Approximately 27% of workers reported working for the entire month. The majority of workers (85%) reported working for 5 to 8 hours per day. Given the low wages, many workers reported working for more than 8 hours per day.

The data shows that approximately 89% of the household's monthly income falls between Rs. 2000 and Rs. 5000. Only a small proportion of workers (5%) manage to earn Rs. 5,000 to 10,000 per month. Another 4% of households reported they have an income of Rs. 10,000 to 15,000 per month.

Data shows that more than 50 % of sanitation workers are female. Most of the female respondents cited low family income as the main reason for joining sanitation work. Living in

cities requires more money to cover household expenses and rent. Many female workers reported that half of their monthly income is spent on rent, leaving very little for household consumption. For instance, Sitamani, a female worker, shared that it was difficult to sustain a family of five on her husband's single income. To contribute to the family's income, she decided to take up sanitation work two years ago. At present, both of them work on a contractual basis with BMC. In her words:

"I have been doing this work for the last two years. It was difficult for us to survive on a single person's earnings. Both of us get six thousand rupees per month. Our family is staying in a rented house, and the monthly rent is 3,000 rupees. We spend the rest of the money on the family. It is very difficult to manage the family" (Sitamani, 26-year-old).

The majority of workers remain unsatisfied with the contractual nature of employment, poor working conditions, and long working hours. They feel exploited, as they are paid less while the volume of work they do is quite high. They are aware of the social security and the relatively better payments made to permanent employees in BMC. They said that people with permanent jobs are relatively better off. Government norms also regulate their working hours. One of the respondents compared the monthly wages of permanent workers and their workload. In the words of Renubala, a 46-year-old female sanitation worker,

"The permanent workers get a high salary and are eligible to get other facilities from the government. The workload of contractual workers is also higher than that of the permanent workers. But, they are getting lower wages than the permanent workers".

Most workers are aware that daily wage work can fetch them relatively higher wages. However, as mentioned earlier, daily wage work involves uncertainty, and there is a scarcity of daily wage work in Bhubaneswar city. Hence, many are forced to continue sanitation work on low wages. The exploitative nature of sanitation work can be understood in the words of one of the workers,

"Our condition is very poor. Even a daily labourer gets Rs.400 per day. In contrast, a sanitation worker gets only Rs. 150 for 8 hours of work. Because of the low caste (chooti jati), we are forced to do this work?"

Many workers found themselves trapped in the caste- and contractual-based work. Caste-based exploitation of labour in terms of extracting maximum work on low wages for a longer period is also evident in the voices of the respondents. All respondents reported a delay in monthly wage payments. Many workers highlighted the corrupt practices of private contractors who lure them to work for relatively lower wages with a promise of permanent recruitment. It is pertinent to note that, due to the lack of proper implementation of labour laws, sanitation workers are forced to work longer hours on minimal wages.

Lack of safety gears, training, and manual scavenging

According to Chapter VIII of the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Rehabilitation Act, 2013, it is the responsibility of local authorities and other agencies to use appropriate technology and machines for cleaning septic tanks and sewers so that manual handling of excreta is avoided (GoI, 2013). The private contractors and the BMC grossly ignore these directions. The majority of workers (92%) reported that they were not given any training or safety equipment when they entered sewers. As most of the workers are Dalits,

their voices regarding the lack of safety gears, training, and forced entry into manholes remain unheard.

Ramesh, a 35-year-old sanitation worker at BMC, who cleans manholes, described his lack of training to handle emergencies and protect himself. In his words:

"When I joined, that time I did not get any training. It is very difficult to work inside the manhole. One day I fell unconscious inside a manhole. My friend admitted me into the hospital" (Ramesh, Sanitation Worker).

Workers remain critical of the BMC policies regarding the use of machines to clean manholes. They reported that machinery is available to clean the manhole, but the BMC hardly uses it. The workers enter the manhole to manually clear the blockages. The FGD discussion highlighted:

"BMC has a limited number of machines to clean the sewerage system in the city. Quite often these remain out of order. Hence, workers are forced to enter the main sewerage lines through manholes and remove solid substances with their bare hands. In the name of equipment, these workers are provided with a rope and a bucket." (FGD 6)

The majority of workers remain critical of the corruption of government officials and private contractors in the provision of safety gear. The worker said that the official and private contractors often cite lack of funds as the main reason for not providing safety equipment. A few workers lamented that officials and contractors profit by occasionally supplying poor-quality material. Approximately 56% of workers reported that uniforms were given in the name of protective gear. In the focus group discussion, the workers showed concern about the health risks and threat to life posed by manual scavenging. They are aware of the deaths happening in the manholes.

The FGD 6 reflected on the poor safety measures, gross negligence, and no regard for workers' lives by BMC:

"Cleaning manhole is one of the most hazardous works under the municipal corporation. Entering the manhole without any safety measures, such as a gas mask, entails a high health risk. Workers suffer from lung and skin diseases... Every day a manhole worker dies in India. The government pays no attention to training and the use of advanced technology to clean the manholes". (FGD 6)

The apathy of the government and local bodies responsible for providing sanitation services is evident in the narratives of most of the sanitation workers covered in the study. It came to light that, to avoid public glare, the workers are asked to enter the manhole at night, which is a clear violation of the law. There are no alternative avenues to earn a livelihood for most sanitation workers, which further reinforce their decision to continue the work, risking their lives.

Sanitation work, stigma, and everyday humiliation

Geeta (2009) defines humiliation as an experience because it is felt; it is held and savoured in the very gut of one's existence, in the core of our being. For Dalits, their bodies are ontological wounds, prisons; her/his bodily being predates her/him and is regarded as proof of lowness. Servility, a sort of untouchability, denies a being's authenticity. Majority of female

sanitation workers narrated their plight and humiliation suffered at the hands of people in the municipal department, as well as others at the work site. They reported suffering social discrimination, humiliation, verbal abuse, and inhumane treatment at work sites.

Both male and female workers suffer from the social stigma. Approximately 77 (33%) of sanitation workers reported experiencing social prejudice while working on the job site, while 27 (12%) reported experiencing inhumane treatment. The majority of sanitation workers reported going thirsty during the summer, as caste Hindus do not give water. They get drenched in the rainy season because they can't stand in the verandas of the caste Hindus in the colonies.

A few workers voiced the hostility encountered during garbage collection. People living in colonies practice untouchability and do not want to see sanitation workers in the morning. Hence, they do not open the door and throw garbage outside or into the drainage. It not only increases the burden on sanitation workers but also entails financial losses. They reported that contractors tend to cut their wages if garbage is found on the streets or in the drainage. BMC and contractors use the threat of wage cuts to discipline and control the Dalit bodies. It also shows the financial and moral corruption of BMC and contractors.

Hari, a 25-year-old worker who collects garbage from residential areas, expressed:

"It is very difficult to work in colonies. I face problems as many households do not give garbage after ringing the bell many times. They do not want to see my face in the morning. Sometimes households throw garbage onto the road and into the drainage. I have to work twice and pick up the garbage from the drainage. If the supervisor finds the garbage lying here and there, he will deduct my wage."

Poor health and the plight of sanitation workers

Contracting various respiratory and skin diseases is one of the hazards suffered by the majority of sanitation workers. The majority of sanitation workers chew tobacco, smoke, and drink alcohol. They stated that chewing tobacco or smoking allows them to relax and forget about the filthy place they must clean. As a result, of chewing tobacco and smoking, the majority of workers are exposed to health risks such as cancer, heart disease, and infections such as hepatitis, leptospirosis, and helicobacter, skin problems, respiratory system problems, and altered pulmonary function parameters (Mishra, Dodiya, and Mathur, 2012; Tiwari, 2013). For instance, in the present study, 40% of sanitation workers suffered injuries at the work site. Many suffer from continuous skin allergies, gastric issues, cold, and cough.

The contractual nature of work seriously limits sanitation workers' access to health care facilities. Workers do not get any financial support to cope with the injuries and loss of work during the treatment. They find it difficult to bear the costs of medicine and consultation fees in private hospitals. They are unable to continue the treatment for a long time. Susanta, who had suffered injuries during the work, did not receive any financial help from BMC. He demands that the government should provide them with health insurance and medical facilities, as they are engaged in such dangerous work. He recounted:

"At the time of my accident, I was severely injured and fractured my left leg. In the hospital, I had to spend more than one lakh rupees. The BMC never gave me a single rupee. After the accident, I did not go to work for more than four to five months. I did not get a salary from the BMC". (Susanta, 37-year-old)

The workers and their families suffer hard during the injury period. The workers have to either seek financial help from their peers or borrow money from friends and other sources. Sukanti, who has worked as a sweeper at BMC for the past 8 years, shared her experience when her husband suffered an ankle injury at the worksite.

In her words:

"My husband has been working in BMC for the last 15 years. He faced a serious ankle injury on the work site. He stayed for more than three months in the hospital. They spent more than two lakhs rupees for his treatment. We gave application to BMC for financial support. But we did not receive any help from BMC. We had to borrow money from friends, relatives, and Self Help Group (SGH). Every month we have to pay interest of rupees five thousand. My family is still spending money on his medicine and medical check-up" (Sukanti, 49-year-old).

Sanitation workers also borrow money from moneylenders and contractors at very high interest rates. Workers spend approximately 25% of their income repaying interest (Lenka, 2019). There is a clear link between the contractual nature of work, low wages, and indebtedness among sanitation workers.

Discussion and Conclusion

An intersectional perspective embedded in social theory helps us understand how caste, class, gender, and labour arrangements force Dalit migrants into sanitation work in urban areas. Lack of land ownership in villages compels many Dalits to migrate to cities. The study shows that most SC workers who migrated from rural areas remained tied to caste-based occupations. The majority of the workers live in impoverished and segregated slums in Bhubaneswar. They pay a relatively high rent to live in slums with limited access to water and sanitation. In Bhubaneswar, caste relations in terms of ritual status and hierarchy operate in subtle ways. The paper highlights that 80 percent of sanitation workers suffer stigma, untouchability, discrimination, and injuries at the work sites.

The nexus between neoliberal state policies, caste power, and private contractors reinforces exploitation of sanitation worker's labour in multiple ways. First, state-led privatisation of sanitation services has actively encouraged the contractualisation of jobs in municipal bodies. SCs work on a contractual basis at a minimal wage of 125-150 INR per day for extended hours. Second, the low-paying nature of the work often forces Dalit women to enter sanitation work to cover the cost of living. She suffers exploitation and sexual harassment. In addition, she also takes care of domestic chores and looks after her injured husband. The voices of these workers remain muffled. Third, workers' basic labour rights are denied. Workers are exploited and penalised owing to the casteist attitude of caste Hindu residents and contractors.

The workers are aware of the scarcity of work and the availability of cheap labour. This kind of labour precarity, coupled with caste, migrant status, and poverty, renders sanitation workers powerless. Hence, sanitation workers remain vulnerable to the practice of enforced manual scavenging. The discursive nature of state policies creates avenues for BMC officials and private contractors to evade labour laws and deprive sanitation workers of all social and financial benefits. The contractual nature of work is a major reason for sanitation workers' failure to claim their basic labour rights and to resist the corrupt practices of government officials and private contractors. It further hampers the basic rights of workers to protest against the denial of basic labour rights in terms of occupational safety and demand

appropriate compensation in case of accidental injuries/diseases suffered at the work site. The findings of the study are consistent with Khatarker's (2025) argument that 'market-friendly' neoliberal reforms in the provision of sanitation services have led to economic, social, and moral corruption, resulting from 'low civility in social and political culture' of the country.

Workers in the present study are critical of BMC's use of machines/technology for sanitation-related work. The findings of the study highlight that the micro-politics of enforced manual scavenging continues along lines of caste and gender (Ranganathan, 2022), despite the availability of machines and technology. Automation and mechanisation in the field of sanitation work have failed to protect sanitation workers from manual scavenging. At the policy level, it also reflects the apathy of the government to provide dignified ways of employment in sanitation services. The study's finding aligns with urban ecology research's argument that there is an increasing trend to use "people as infrastructure" which entails harm to caste, gendered, and raced bodies in the metabolism of the city" (Ranganathan, 2022:6).

The lived experiences of sanitation workers reveal that they are caught in the vicious cycle of caste-related 'powerlessness', poverty, ill health/injuries, and indebtedness. State and private providers cooperate and co-opt the sanitation labour of Dalits and keep them disenfranchised. Research evidence suggests that the state's sanitation campaign actively makes sanitation workers invisible. It masks the infrastructural violence suffered by workers based on caste, gender, and religion, particularly manual scavenging deaths, sexual assaults, precarious labour contracts, and poor living conditions of slums (Balsamanta and Reddy, 2018; Desai et al., 2015; Kornberg, 2019; Rodgers and O'Neill, 2012).

To ensure the dignity and well-being of sanitation workers, it is imperative to empower them. Local bodies and state governments should take proactive measures to address caste-based discrimination and ensure the dignity of labour by providing adequate protective equipment, fair wages, and comprehensive health insurance. To conclude, it can be said that it is pertinent to delineate caste-based hierarchy, occupation, and stigma that are naturalised and remain hidden in the narrative of city development, where cities are made smart at the cost of marginalised bodies.

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