

State, Insecurity and Policy Gaps: The Life of Pourakarmikas in Bangalore, Karnataka

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Abstract: In the present neoliberal times, civic workers everywhere live a life of precarity, without being recognised for their services and left to the vagaries of a market-oriented state. In Karnataka, the *Pourakarmikas* / Civic workers are facing an existential challenge due to temporary/contract-based employment for the past three decades. Various committees were constituted over time and proposed measures to improve the conditions of *Pourakarmikas*. The Salappa Committee in 1976, the “Three-Member Official Committee” in 2013, and the Report of the National Law School University of India in 2002 were significant, recommending improvements in their working conditions, including the regularisation of jobs and amenities. These reports have identified the deplorable working conditions, policy lacunae, and implementation shortcomings. Further, the majority of *Pourakarmikas* are from the Dalit community; the social location adds further weightage towards their exclusion from the policy protections of the state. The present study examines the socio-economic conditions of the *Pourakarmikas* in Bangalore. It further interrogates social-economic exclusion from both the perspectives of the state and the *Pourakarmikas*, using in-depth interviews and Focused Group Discussions (FGD), and field observation. The methodology involves Deductive Qualitative Analysis (DQA) to understand the extent of exclusion and discrimination within the neoliberal framework. The research captures the social and legal awareness of *Pourakarmikas* and the role of social work/civil society in strengthening their understanding of standing up for and fighting for their rights.

Keywords: Pourakarmikas; sanitation workers; caste discrimination; social awareness; legal rights; neoliberalism; civic workers

1 Introduction

Employment with dignity has been a cornerstone of contemporary political discourse while addressing social and economic inequality. In the Indian context, the historical social classification and its consequent discrimination and exclusion have been discussed extensively in the Constituent Assembly of India and addressed to a greater extent through constitutional rights and safeguards to prevent or break the nexus between social identity and profession. Along with the historical, religious, and cultural dictates, modern politics still reiterate and glorify these caste-based divisions and professions in the name of culture and social harmony. Traditionally, the Indian social system glorified the role of scavengers and even made it their *Summum Bonum*, the ultimate goal of their lives within the Indian caste-based ethical framework. Even Gandhi (1936) mentioned it in his article “The Ideal Bangi.” The notion and scenario have not changed much in 2025, where the scavenging community throughout India

faces the worst forms of discrimination from society and the state without any protective mechanism.

After independence, the union and state governments have taken various initiatives to address the issues related to scavenging communities. Some of the important initiatives till 1990's are the Scavengers Living Conditions Enquiry Committee by Government of Bombay in 1949, the Scavenging Conditions Enquiry Committee by Union Ministry of Home Affairs in 1957, Customary Rights of Scavengers by Department of Social Welfare under the chairmanship of MR Malkani in 1966, Commission to enquire into the living conditions of Safai Mazdoors by Haryana state in 1969, A Committee on Improvement of Living and Working Conditions of Sweepers and Scavengers under the chairmanship of IPD Salappa by Government of Karnataka in 1972 and Task Force for Tackling the Problems of Scavengers by Planning Commission in 1989 (GoI, 1997). These Committees and Commissions have made significant recommendations to regulate, abolish, and rehabilitate the caste-based scavenging profession. Despite many of these recommendations over the years, there has not been any substantial change in the lives of scavengers across India. After 1990, when we formally adopted Neoliberal economic policies, the state began withdrawing many social security measures, further worsening the conditions of the scavenging community in India. This research examines the lives and working conditions of *Pourakarmikas*, civic workers in Bangalore, Karnataka, within the broader framework of neoliberal political economy to understand their issues and struggles.

2 Studies on Pourakarmikas

The government of India established the Scavenging Conditions Enquiry Committee in 1957, which published its report in 1961. The report recommended state intervention to abolish the customary rights of the scavenging community in India. The abolition of customary rights extends beyond the legal purview to address social aspects, and the committee recommended various measures, including compensation and rehabilitation (GoI, 1961). The Report on the Customary Rights of Scavengers (1966), under the chairmanship of M R Malkani, recommended various measures to bring about legal and social changes to ameliorate the condition of scavengers. The scavengers, who occupy the lowest social position in the caste hierarchy, are treated with contempt and disdain by municipal authorities and the public. A note of dissent was given by KL Balmiki, MP, stating that despite various recommendations by earlier committees for the welfare of the scavenging community, their lives have not changed, and they still suffer from social and legal exclusion.

The report of the Committee on Improvement of Living and Working Conditions of Sweepers and Scavengers (1976), chaired by IPD Salappa, is one of the important interventions aimed at improving the conditions of *Pourakarmikas* in Karnataka. The commission's extensive report documented the living and working conditions of *Pourakarmikas*. It discussed various aspects of their housing, health, workplace safety, job security, and more, and proposed sweeping measures to rehabilitate them and provide healthy living and working conditions. The reforms were suggested in the areas of maternity benefits, working hours, regularisation, direct payments from municipalities, minimum wages, and the establishment of an Internal Complaint Committee (ICC) for issues related to sexual harassment, etc. (PUCL, 2019). Despite various suggestions in the Salappa report for reforming the working and living conditions of *Pourakarmikas*, the government has not implemented many of them to date. The inhuman living and working conditions of *Pourakarmikas* continue to date, which have become more acute after the adoption of neoliberal political economy in India.

A report titled “Reflections on the Life and Working Conditions of the *Pourakarmikas* in Bangalore: A Progress Report” by NLSIU (2002) highlighted the continuing worsening working situation of *Pourakarmikas* without any changes, despite the Salappa report highlighting these problems earlier. The protective gear, such as gumboots, gloves, and masks, which are mandatory for carrying out cleaning work without bodily harm, was denied to them. These working conditions, combined with long working hours, have taken a significant toll on their health. Most women have back pain, knee pain, respiratory problems, and skin allergies. In most of their hands, we see cuts, burns and holes. For any accidents during working hours, no compensation is provided to contract workers. The above reports and observations highlight the extremely toxic working conditions the *Pourakarmikas* face, with no relief from the state. The state, instead of regularising them and providing better working and living conditions, was keen to adopt neoliberal political economy and withdraw from its responsibilities by privatising the public sector.

In 2015, the research study titled “Health issues of sanitation workers in a town in Karnataka: Findings from a lay health-monitoring study” again showed similar conditions as highlighted earlier by the Salappa report and the NLSIU report. The injuries, such as bruises, cuts, and chest pain, were reported by both men and women. Body aches, backaches, leg pain, headaches, fever, colds, and coughs were very common due to their exposure to toxic working environments, as they enter drains and collect waste in unhygienic conditions. Such a toxic working environment has led to more alcoholism and other unhealthy habits, which further affected their health (Rangamani, Obalesha, & Gaitonde, 2015).

3 Condition of Labourers under Neoliberalism

Neoliberalism, as a political economy framework, emphasises a market-led development process by strengthening private property rights, individual liberty, free markets, and free trade. One important role of the state is to strengthen institutional structures such as the military, defence, police, and judiciary to protect these interests. Further, in line with market-led economic development, the state should actively work to create markets in areas where none exist. Thus, the state will play a minimal interventionist role and focus more on regulating through institutions to improve market performance (Harvey, 2007). More than an economic ideology, neoliberalism regulates the social and cultural spheres alongside the economic sphere. Thus, it creates an enabling environment for private individuals' entrepreneurial freedom, unleashing it for greater economic growth.

Neoliberal ideas, which emerged in the 1940s in the writings of Hayek, challenged the Keynesian welfare state and insisted on free markets as a solution to fostering development. Hayek's work “The Road to Serfdom” equated state intervention with serfdom. The ideas were reflected in the practical politics of Thatcher and Reagan, which were later adopted internationally through institutions like the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank, in their policies such as Structural Adjustment Programs (SAPs) and the Washington Consensus (Connell & Dados, 2014). These political and economic ideas have emerged with a set of principles for the state to adopt, which later became societal values. One of the significant values of neoliberal political economy is a proper legal framework for contractual relations between employers and employees in the marketplace, without any long-term bondage (Zwick, 2018). Such contractualisation strengthens employers' hands to hire and fire in line with market demands. This further discourages workers' unionisation, which benefits employers because employees lack a voice in negotiations.

The classical liberal political-economic framework gave the state a passive role, emphasising non-intervention, whereas the neoliberal state adopted an active role in creating and strengthening the market. The state withdrawal has failed to redistribute wealth and income, thereby creating greater inequality among the population. Due to fierce international competition and the race to increase profits, production costs must be reduced. Wages and other social security protections for employees are eroded in this race, leading to increased contractualisation of the labour force. Thus, the public pension system, public health care, and public education are slowly weakening, creating more space for privatisation (Niggle, 2003). Another important aspect of neoliberal political economy is the insecurity/ precariousness of work. State withdrawal and privatisation have created such insecure conditions that private players employ and dismiss people solely for profit. The state also moves towards such 'insecure' employment conditions by contractualisation of work (Marti, 2019).

The withdrawal of the state has led to the strengthening of divisions based on cultural values and ethnicity all over the world, which has led to more attacks on migrants and minorities. The Indian state formally adopted a neoliberal political economy in 1991, with a clear objective of reducing the fiscal deficit, as directed by international financial institutions that imposed conditions such as privatisation of the public sector, deregulation, and state withdrawal (Venkatanarayanan, 2015). In the Indian context, neoliberal political economy and its consequent state withdrawal from welfare politics have led to more caste, religion and other ethnicity-based consolidation. This is reflected in every sector, including employment, where Dalits are still forced to give their service as scavengers without major transformation. Under the veneer of cultural exclusion, caste has a strong political-economic dimension, manifested in fixed social and economic rights and in the exclusion of a large section of the population from access to resources and opportunities. These restrictions lead to occupational immobility, reiterating the traditional social hierarchy (Thorat & Newman, 2010). Such a restriction prevents lower-caste participation in economic, social, and political life and further entrenches traditional caste-based occupations. The withdrawal of the state and neoliberal political economy creates a 'dehumanisation' in society (Sen & Sengupta, 2017).

4 Living and Working Conditions of Pourakarmikas in Karnataka

Pourakarmikas, also known as civic or sanitation workers in Karnataka, represent a large community primarily engaged in cleaning streets and drains, door-to-door garbage collection, and handling municipal solid waste across cities, towns, and villages in the state (AICCTU, 2023). They belong predominantly to Dalit and other oppressed communities (Salve & Jungari, 2020; Gupta, 2022), often working in extremely degrading, unhygienic, and precarious conditions that expose them to severe health hazards, social stigma, and economic insecurity (Monteiro, 2022; Monteiro & Nalini, 2021; Srinatharaj, 2019). Despite their essential role in maintaining public health and preventing disease outbreaks, their lives are marked by exploitation, lack of job security, irregular or contract-based employment, inadequate wages, absence of basic facilities at the workplace (like drinking water, toilets, and restrooms), and no social security benefits (AICCTU, 2023; Srinatharaj, 2019; Srinivasa Reddy & Kavalipurapu, 2022).

The occupation of *Pourakarmikas* is caste-ordained and hereditary, tied closely to the caste system's discriminatory logic of purity and pollution, which results in social exclusion, discrimination, and deprivation of rights. They face not only occupational hazards but also pervasive caste-based oppression and gendered discrimination, with a significant proportion being women who endure multiple layers of marginalisation (Monteiro, 2022; Srinivasa Reddy & Kavalipurapu, 2022).

State intervention has been limited and often inadequate despite various committee reports and legal provisions calling for its regularisation, improved working conditions, and welfare measures. Significant committees, such as the Salappa Committee (1976), the National Law School University of India Report (2002) and the Three-Member Official Committee (2013), have repeatedly highlighted the need to end exploitative contract labour systems and recommended permanent status for all *Pourakarmikas*, covering daily-wage, contract, and direct payment workers. Despite multiple committees reports and clear legal provisions urging the regularisation, the state intervention in Karnataka has remained both limited and inadequate. The persistence of contract labour systems has further deepened their vulnerability and exclusion from policy protections. Sanitation workers across the country are firmly opposing the contract labour system in their fight for dignified, stable employment and a guaranteed basic income for their livelihoods (AICCTU, 2023; Gowda & Sridhara, 2013; Oza et al., 2022; Bhattacharya & Jafar, 2024).

The social and occupational challenges faced by *Pourakarmikas* demand immediate and decisive action to secure dignified working conditions, social justice, legal recognition, and meaningful inclusion in policy discussions. Their struggle is not just important; it is essential. *Pourakarmikas* are fighting against caste oppression, confronting exploitative labour practices, and insisting on permanent employment, fair wages, and robust social security. These demands are critical for ensuring their economic and social dignity in both urban and rural areas of Karnataka. This movement is a vital part of the ongoing legacy of working-class and anti-caste efforts to eradicate manual scavenging and dismantle caste-based occupational discrimination (Murphy, 2010; Rajaraman et al., 2013). In the absence of a solid legal and policy framework on workers' rights, employment conditions, and grievance redressal mechanisms, the persisting inequalities bound up with class, caste, and occupational-based discrimination cannot be addressed (Rajaraman et al., 2013; Walters, 2016; Suba & S, 2020).

In Bangalore, there are about 18,500 *Pourakarmikas* in the Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BSWML, 2026). Their work includes street sweeping, waste collection, drain cleaning, sewage maintenance, and disinfection of public areas. Historically, their employment was mostly contractual with private contractors, leading to precarious wages and poor working conditions. Karnataka has 42,000 civic workers. Of these, only 11,133 were regularised in 2023 (Times of India, 2025). In Bangalore, only about 2,500 were permanent employees in 2007. However, in 2025, the Karnataka government regularised over 12,650 *Pourakarmikas* as permanent employees (The Week, 2025), following a long struggle to form a labour union under the leadership of All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU).

The regularisation led to some improvements, but hazardous and unhygienic working environments, lack of sanitation and drinking water facilities onsite, exposure to toxic substances, caste-based discrimination and violence, wage irregularities especially for contract workers, insufficient occupational safety training, and gaps in social security still remain a major concern and require continued policy attention and social justice initiatives. This situation shows the complex reality of *Pourakarmikas* in Bangalore, caught between their indispensable public health role and entrenched social and labour vulnerabilities, highlighting an urgent need for sustained intervention, empowerment through awareness and legal support, and comprehensive reforms for their welfare and rights.

5 Methodology

This research uses the Deductive Qualitative Analysis (DQA) methodology to understand the life and working conditions of *Pourakarmikas* within the theoretical framework of neoliberal

political economy. The traditional qualitative methodology uses an inductive approach to understand and interpret reality, thereby formulating a theoretical framework. But the DQA uses the a priori theory to critically understand and analyse the qualitative data (Fife & Gossner, 2024). The benefit of DQA methodology is its theoretical framework for interpreting qualitative phenomena. Previous understandings from the literature, commissions, and their recommendations provided a framework for interpreting and understanding the living and working conditions of *Pourakarmikas*, which the researchers found apt for furthering the study. Even though DQA is not well developed within contemporary research methods, it still provides a well-focused analytical framework for the study.

5.1 Data Collection

Since there were limitations, such as language and official permission for on-site interviews/interactions, in approaching the *Pourakarmikas*, we took the help of the AICCTU to collect data for this research. To avoid selectivity bias, the study employed 3 data collection approaches, viz., Participant observation, Focused group discussion (FGD), and In-depth interview. Purposive and snowball sampling techniques were used for the study. The researchers participated in the AICCTU meeting to understand and develop the initial framework for this study. Further, the researchers conducted participant observation at two sites in North Bangalore. During these visits, a Focused Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted with 20 *Pourakarmikas*, during which they shared their working and living experiences. These workers were predominantly from Andhra Pradesh, Tamil Nadu, and North Karnataka (Gulbarga, Yadgiri). In addition, an in-depth interview was conducted with an AICCTU activist who worked with the *Pourakarmikas* to understand the struggles they have endured in their fight against institutional and social discrimination. The study uses deductive coding, developed based on the neoliberal theoretical framework, to analyse the data. The neoliberal political-economic framework explains the withdrawal of the state and the contractualisation of the workforce. The framework has provided variables on working and living conditions, and on social exclusion and discrimination for the Deductive Qualitative Analysis (DQA). The analysis framework explains the research process in arriving at the final observations.

Table 1: Framework for analysis

Framework for analysis	
Research question and guiding theory	To understand the socioeconomic status of <i>Pourakarmikas</i> under the neoliberal framework.
Functionalising theory	Neoliberalism and contractualisation, social exclusion, worker exploitation, etc.
Data collection through a purposive sample	The following 3 approaches were used: 1. Participant observation method 2. Focus group discussion 3. In-depth interview
Sensitising Constructs	Coded under the following categories: 1. Nature of Employment and Work Conditions

	2. Discrimination and Social Exclusion 3. Legal Awareness 4. Support Systems
Observations	Based on the analysis, observations regarding the socioeconomic status of <i>Pourakarmikas</i> within neoliberal framework have been arrived at.

Source: Authors Framework (2025)

6 Results and Discussion

6.1 Nature of Employment and Work Conditions

Neoliberal political economy emphasises fewer legal restrictions and increased informality through contractual employment, thereby giving employers greater flexibility to hire and fire according to their profit needs (Sundar, 2005). The *Pourakarmikas* are facing the triple identity problem of class, caste and contractual nature of employment. Their daily routine begins early, with reporting time between 6:00 and 6:45 am. From then until 10:30 am, they are on the road performing regular cleaning duties. After a brief half-hour breakfast break, they continue working until 2:00 pm. Following this, they are assigned to “gang work”, where they must clean areas with excessive garbage or cover for absent colleagues. This gang work typically begins after 2:00 pm and involves working in groups to tackle the most heavily littered roads. Their workday spans eight hours, including travel time, and most workers commute by auto-rickshaw since public buses do not reach their workplaces, often leaving them far from the site. The workspace does not provide any facilities, such as drinking water or toilets. The women workers face these extreme conditions and suffer more during their menstruation and pregnancy. The *Pourakarmikas* have adapted themselves to the situation by not drinking water regularly.

“They don’t drink water and most of them chew betel leaf as these also cause some other issues, so that’s the only way to stop from not drinking water” (Interview).

The neoliberal framework, which was based on market fundamentalism, ignores all aspects other than economic growth and profit-making. This leads to reduced labour protections, which affects labourers' health (Frey & MacNaughton, 2018).

“Like, if you speak to the people who are working, everybody has back pain, everybody has chest pain; a lot of people have uterus problems. And a lot of people have kidney-related issues because nobody drinks water at that time while they are working.” (Interview).

The Bruhat Bengaluru Mahanagara Palike (BBMP), the Bangalore municipal corporation, does not provide regular health check-ups or other medical support to its employees. They conduct medical camps occasionally..

“There will be a lot of garbage, which includes both wet and dry waste; no one separates it, and we should only separate it. If it is not separated, the AW (Area Ward) in-charge will scold us.”(FGD)

The working conditions are so inimical to the *Pourakarmikas* that they will be blamed for everything. Being under contract, they are unable to respond to every criticism and are forced

to listen to their supervisors without much resistance. Their monthly salaries are paid directly by the BBMP, but the income is insufficient to meet basic needs such as rent and debt repayment. Many workers have been in service for over a decade, with some having worked for 15 to 20 years, yet their working conditions remain extremely harsh. They manually clean trash, often without adequate protective gear. Only one pair of gloves is issued per month, which quickly becomes wet, dirty, and unusable. Exposure to foul-smelling waste and constant inhalation of dust have led to serious health issues, including infections and even cancer, among many workers.

“We use our hands to clean the trash, sometimes it smells, and we get infections. When we sweep the dust, we inhale it. lot of people have got cancer.” (FGD.)

The nature of work and its inhumane conditions force many of them to alcoholism, which further worsens their health conditions.

“The alcoholism within the community because of the nature of the work. The stink is so horrible, and it is difficult to deal with alcoholism.” (Interview).

Even though the Karnataka government regularised the employment of around 12,000 Pourakarmikas in May 2025, they have yet to receive their orders and first salaries as permanent employees. The garbage vehicle drivers are still treated as contract labourers, with no change in their status.

“Anybody who is doing this work of transportation and those who are on contract, they will not be paid wages, minimum three months. You ask in any area, 2 to 3 months is always pending.”(Interview)

The insecurity of work, the inhumane working and living conditions, and the state's withdrawal from providing the required facilities are leading to stressful condition among the *Pourakarmikas*.

6.2 Discrimination and Social Exclusion

As we have seen in earlier discussions in this article, identity consolidation has strengthened after the adoption of neoliberal political economy in India. According to Thorat & Newman (2010), this identity-based consolidation has further reified the caste-based occupational division, leading to occupational immobility and reiterating the traditional social hierarchy. The *Pourakarmikas*, being Dalits, face discrimination and exclusion not only in their personal lives, but also in the professional workplace.

“Nobody gives us water. We will ask around us for water, you know, the bathroom jug, you know, they will bring water from that. They look down on us like we are taking it for free. So, we instead buy a water bottle and drink.” (FGD).

The nature of their work and their social identity together expose them to this extreme form of exclusion, where they are treated in an inhumane form without any dignity. The people do not even treat them with respect and consider them as trash.

“And they call us ‘Kasadhamma’ (Trans. Trash woman), come here and take the trash and go. If not, they literally call me “Kasa” (Trans. Trash), come and take the trash, and go.” (FGD).

They are treated disrespectfully in all other public places because of their identity and profession. Hospitals, buses, hotels, and other public places: whenever they see *Pourakarmikas* in their uniforms, they face discrimination in many forms.

“I went to the hospital because I was sick, and people around me distanced themselves from me. Even if we earn and face difficulties, aren’t we humans?”(FGD)

“The public, if they see us standing somewhere and talking, they ask us to leave and not cause any nuisance. And we don’t have an office. We have to stand, sit, and talk in the street and get scolded by the public for it.”(FGD)

Till the time when the majority of them were under contractors, they faced extreme forms of exclusion and discrimination. They were not paid minimum wages; they underwent sexual exploitation and physical violence at the hands of contractors.

“The contractors, it was like, the level of exploitation, it was something else, from physical violence to sexual violence, and there was no proper payment of wages. When the union raised these issues to treat them with respect and dignity, they said that if anybody said anything, they would be terminated, so the main thing was to stop such termination.” (Interview)

Labour unionisation has always been considered an obstacle to unlimited profit maximisation under the neoliberal regime. Thus, unionisation at every level is resisted by any neoliberal regime. *Pourakarmikas* were organised under different unions in Bangalore. The dominant union of *Pourakarmikas* was under the All India Central Council of Trade Unions (AICCTU). After being organised solely under the union, they were able to claim and exercise many of their rights, including regularisation of employment. But one important aspect of neoliberal market restructuring is the dismantling of labour unions, thereby compromising workers’ rights in the service of profit-making capital (Erol & Sahin, 2022). The *Pourakarmikas*’ union has to fight against many forms of discrimination, and the BBMP was forced to issue guidelines to address discriminatory practices.

“*Pourakarmikas* were not allowed to touch the gates, and people would give water to them in toilet mugs, they had no toilets. Even if there is a toilet, they will not let them use it. Like, if there is a public toilet, they say *Pourakarmikas* cannot use it because they are considered dirty.” (Interview)

After the unionisation of workers, there have been many changes in their working conditions. The *Pourakarmikas* began demanding their rights, before which they were neither paid minimum wages nor had fixed working time.

“The minimum wages that they are supposed to get, but in hand, they will get at least 3 to 4 thousand less. They will just get less, and if they ask anything, they will say you were absent this and that. And there are no timings for them, no timings. Like they may work for 12 hours, 13 hours, 14 hours, so no fixed timing at all.”(Interview)

This exploitation of *Pourakarmikas* is not just because they do garbage-related work, but also because they belong to the Dalit community. The other community members are not interested in doing this work, as they consider it to be done by Dalits only.

“You are able to exploit because they are so marginalised, so all that. I mean, it is not a coincidence. Normally, any housekeeping sanitation is 100% Dalit. Nobody does this

work. There are many cases where the BBMP has called for jobs, and people from other communities will apply, but they will not do the work. They will take the money, and they will employ somebody to do it.”(Interview)

The ultimate political solution for *Pourakarmikas* is to leave this caste-based profession and enter other mainstream professions. If any community other than Dalits had been involved in this scavenging work, the government would have mechanised this profession long ago. Their union is demanding quality education for children and other entrepreneurship opportunities to break this caste based hereditary profession, which is still a long way from being implemented by the government.

6.3 Social and Legal Awareness

Due to their social and economic conditions, *Pourakarmikas* were taken for granted by contractors until they were under private contract labour. Even after *Pourakarmikas* were placed under the BBMP's direct payment system, not all issues were resolved, as their socio-economic conditions did not allow them to question or challenge the authorities regarding their legal rights. The unionisation provided them with significant scope to engage with the BBMP authorities and brought about changes in their working and living conditions, but more intervention from the government is still required to bring them out of this caste-based profession. The union has been a great forum for them to raise social and legal awareness among the *Pourakarmikas*, enabling future changes.

“We used to do rallies saying that if anybody did not treat people with respect, then we were going to file a case against them, so some things kind of changed after that. We have done many rallies for upholding the dignity of labour, and we used to say that if anybody is practising untouchability, we will file a case, and we will not collect garbage from that house. But these practices still continue.” (Interview)

After the *Pourakarmikas* became aware of the hazardous nature of their work, they demanded, through their unions, some form of compensation for performing this work. Based on their collective demand, the BBMP started giving them hazardous allowance.

“After our protest, they had given 3000 rupees as hazardous allowance/ risk allowance that they did not give to these people earlier.”(Interview)

Earlier, when they were working under the contractors, they were paid less than the minimum wage because the contractors used to pocket some of their wages. However, after organising under the union and gaining greater awareness of their rights, they were able to demand and secure their minimum wages.

“Union was independent, but they all had come together and done it actually, and demanded this and that’s when the minimum wages first got notified because of their struggles.” (Interview)

To break this chain of caste-based hereditary professions, the *Pourakarmikas* now demand that their work include opportunity for promotions. This will have them serving as supervisors and in other higher positions, helping them break this hereditary caste-profession trap. The BBMP has not responded so far, but their demand shows greater awareness of the need to transform their lives by breaking this caste-based profession.

6.4 Support System

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Dalit organisations played a pivotal role in organising *Pourakarmikas* and pushing for their rights through sustained legal and grassroots activism. These efforts were not isolated; independent unions came together in solidarity, demanding fair treatment, regularisation of employment, and recognition of sanitation work as hazardous. Their collective struggle led to the first notification of minimum wages for *Pourakarmikas*, marking a significant milestone in labour rights advocacy. Rallies were a central strategy in which workers publicly declared that any form of disrespect or caste-based discrimination would be met with legal action. They warned that if untouchability was practised, such as denying water or treating workers as impure, they would file cases and refuse to collect garbage from those households. These actions helped shift public attitudes in some areas, though caste-based practices still persist.

Even though *Pourakarmikas* received support from various non-governmental organisations, other than unions, they were only trying to sustain their existing discriminatory conditions rather than break the chains of the hereditary profession. The NGOs were more interested in privatising the work, which would create greater insecurity and inhumane working conditions. The NGO's have preconceived notions regarding the *Pourakarmikas* as lazy and not hard working, which has both class and caste connotations according to AICCTU. Many of their basic livelihood issues were not addressed by the NGOs.

“Because of the types of problems we faced, we joined the association. The association helps us when they discriminate against us based on caste, don't pay our salary, we don't have an ESI Card, and we don't get PF.” (FGD)

But still, the children of *Pourakarmikas* face discrimination in schools and other public places. Even with very limited interventions to change this situation, fulfilling their basic needs could give them more confidence to fight it.

“Children face discrimination: it used to happen, but now there are rules about it. And if someone tries to discriminate, who parents are BBMP workers, there are orders to remove those perpetrators from the school.” (FGD)

After the struggle of *Pourakarmikas* by forming the union, they were able to eliminate the contractors, and everyone came under the direct contract role of BBMP in 2017. This has strengthened their bargaining power in demanding their basic legal rights, which were absent under private contractors. Such actions have made them well aware of the legal provisions and other support systems, which were denied to them earlier.

7 Findings and Recommendations

In the neoliberal political economy, the state's withdrawal from providing a safe and secure working environment for the working class and the assignment of such roles to private players have created greater distress among vulnerable sections of the population. Further, their social identity has made things worse, making it difficult to come out of this caste-based hereditary profession. The long-term vision for *Pourakarmikas* extends beyond securing permanent employment; it aims to create pathways out of sanitation work and into safer, more dignified roles. Once workers are made permanent, their roles should have scope for higher promotions, allowing them to transition into positions such as attenders or administrative staff. This shift must be accompanied by improvements in wages, working conditions, and living standards, including the provision of housing and access to education for their children.

Education is seen as a critical tool for breaking the cycle of caste-based occupational confinement, with calls for the state to guarantee full support up to higher education for *Pourakarmikas'* children.

The workforce includes not only sweepers but also drivers and helpers, who are often excluded from direct payment systems and remain under the exploitative control of contractors. Despite significant public funds being allocated for sanitation, very little reaches the workers themselves. Contractors frequently siphon off money, even in the name of safety equipment. NGOs operating dry waste collection centres have also adopted contractor-like practices, creating exploitative conditions under the guise of social service.

Caste remains a central axis of exclusion. Even Dalits who have converted to Islam or Christianity continue to be trapped in sanitation work, while other communities avoid such labour altogether. If sanitation had been assigned to dominant castes, it is widely believed the work would have been mechanised by now. The waste crisis persists, with garbage strewn across public spaces, and union members argue that bringing auto drivers and transport workers under direct municipal control could significantly improve waste management.

Many *Pourakarmikas* have completed their Pre-University Course(PUC), and some have even begun college education, challenging stereotypes and demonstrating the potential for upward mobility. Mixed housing is also advocated to dismantle caste-based segregation and promote social integration. Ultimately, while permanency is a crucial step, the broader goal is to enable *Pourakarmikas* to exit sanitation work entirely and access opportunities for a better life.

8 Conclusion

The application of the deductive qualitative analysis substantiated a broader framework of neoliberal implications for the *Pourakarmikas*. Multiple aspects, such as the Nature of Employment and Work Conditions, Discrimination and Social Exclusion, Legal Awareness, and Support Systems, have substantiated the neoliberal theory.

Given the nature of employment and working conditions, protective gear has been budgeted and funds allocated, but in reality, it is not provided. With regard to discrimination and social exclusion, the observation clearly highlights the State's lack of seriousness to protect their rights. Despite being appointed for the sanitation work, the employees from upper castes have been found to get their job done through Dalit workers, which goes unnoticed by the State.

The realm of legal awareness offers a broader scope for social workers and other activists to pitch in and serve, as the findings clearly document the positive impact of Unionisation in empowering *Pourakarmikas* to exercise their constitutional and legal rights. Educating the *Pourakarmikas* and their future generations will pave the way for the termination of this inhumane job. As far as the support systems are concerned, the much-appreciated NGOs are found to be perpetuating the injustices and discrimination fuelled by the prejudices and stereotypical thinking rather than actually providing the sanitation workers any solace.

Through interactions with *Pourakarmikas* and activists, the study identified specific areas where the state and social workers can effectively intervene to mitigate the negative effects of neoliberalism on sanitation workers in Bangalore.

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