

Protecting our sanitation workers: the frontline ‘swachhata’ soldiers in times of COVID-19

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The issue of urban sanitation in India has been brought to the forefront of public discourse over the last five years. This may be largely attributed to the launch of the Swachh¹ Bharat Mission (SBM) in October 2014. Engagement from senior political leadership has catalysed participation across segments and given the cause of sanitation consistent attention and focus. Although there have been previous government sanitation programmes, this was the first time that it had taken the shape of a mass movement, drawing involvement from not just the highest political and bureaucratic leadership, but also stakeholders who have been traditionally less interested in India’s sanitation situation, be it business houses, media and entertainment industry, celebrities and most importantly, citizens.

Sanitation workers: the invisible warriors of SBM-Urban

The conversation around the sanitation would, however, be incomplete without mentioning those who undertake the task. There are over five million sanitation workers² in India collecting waste from our households, cleaning our streets and public toilets, sewer lines and septic tanks. The transformation that we witness on the ground today, be it cleaner roads, regular waste collection or well-maintained public toilets, is largely a result of the efforts of these workers engaged solely in the business of cleanliness.

Over five million sanitation workers in India, over 50 per cent women

Key challenges include low wages, financial insecurity, occupational hazards

Social stigma and discrimination due to their caste and nature of work.

Unfortunately, these sanitation workers or ‘safai karmacharis’ are at the bottom of the social and economic ladder, often facing marginalisation because of their caste in several cases and, ironically, because of the very profession they are in. Low wages and financial insecurity, occupational and environmental hazards, lack of social safety nets, stigma and discrimination are only some of the challenges that these workers face on an everyday basis. The risks are even higher for the contractual workforce whose wages are significantly lower than permanent workers and who are, in most cases, excluded from workers’ unions.

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Women, who make up more than 50 per cent³ of urban sanitation workers, are also especially vulnerable because of their gender. The female workforce ends up facing greater discrimination in wages, legal redressal for claiming entitlements, participation in decision-making processes and in receiving the benefits of government welfare programmes.

Programmes such as SBM-Urban have focussed on ensuring a dignified and regular source of livelihood for *safai karmacharis*. According to data from the 4th edition of Swachh Survekshan,⁴ the annual cleanliness survey for urban India conducted by the Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), over 84,000 informal waste pickers have been integrated into the formal workforce with several urban local bodies (ULBs) such as the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC) and Mysuru Municipal Corporation (MMU) providing medical insurance and facilities for regular health check-ups for sanitation workers. Although such efforts by the Govt and many states and cities are welcome, there is still plenty more to be done to ensure coverage of all five million sanitation workers in India.

The COVID-19 challenge

Along with doctors, nurses and healthcare workers, it is sanitation workers who are playing a crucial role in preventing the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. In a positive development, the central and state governments have, to some extent, put in place directives and mechanisms to protect this group. Four days into the first phase of the lockdown, MoHUA issued an advisory to all states and Urban Local Bodies (ULBs) regarding regular check-ups of sanitation workers while on duty during COVID-19 and payment of wages even if they were unable to report to work due to the lockdown. In April 2020, the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE) also issued detailed guidelines for ensuring the safety of sanitation workers who are in the frontline fight against COVID-19⁵. In the national capital, Delhi government announced an insurance of INR10 million⁶ to the kin of healthcare and sanitation workers in case of their death during the pandemic.

Creating a social safety net for sanitation workers

Going forward, the COVID-19 crisis presents an opportunity to reimagine the idea of inclusive development vis-à-vis sanitation workers. The finance minister's address on 26 March 2020, as part of the Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, announced an insurance cover of INR5 million per person for frontline health workers involved in managing the COVID-19 outbreak for a period of ninety days for sanitation staff, doctors, 'Asha workers', paramedics and nurses⁷. While this was indeed welcome, this did not clarify whether the scheme extends to those sanitation workers who are engaged in collection of waste from households, including quarantined areas, as well as those engaged in the cleaning of public areas, including public and community toilets, sewer lines and septic tanks.

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India urgently needs to develop a comprehensive national programme to provide social and healthcare benefits to formal, contractual and informal sanitation workers. This can include a life insurance cover of INR5 million and inclusion in the employee provident fund with individual contributions funded through a pool of funds. Health insurance with an enhanced cover of INR2.5 million could also be integrated with the Ayushman Bharat scheme, providing sanitation workers with a safety net during and beyond the pandemic.

Furthermore, it is critical that adequate provisions are made to ensure provisioning of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and other necessary safety gear to enable them to execute their jobs safely and without fear. In the longer run, it is imperative to create convergence with schemes through bodies such as the National Safai Karmachari Development Corporation (NSKDC) for promotion of dignified livelihood opportunities for not just sanitation workers but their children and family members as well.

Conclusion

While governments at various levels focus on creating frameworks and policies, improving working conditions and providing social protection as well as labour rights for sanitation workers are crucial elements in India's journey towards an inclusive and sustainable sanitation ecosystem. Ultimately, the onus lies with all of us not only to change our perceptions about sanitation workers who are generally regarded as second-class citizens but also to acknowledge their invaluable contribution in India's transformation into a truly *swachh* country.

¹ Swachh/Swachhta = Cleanliness

² The Sanitation Workers Project by Dalberg Advisors, 2017

³ Lived Realities of Women Sanitation Workers in India Insights, published June, 2019

⁴ Swachh survekshan report 2019, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs, March 2019

⁵ Swachh Bharat Mission Urban, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs

⁶ 1 cr for kin of healthcare workers if they die treating corona cases: Kejriwal, Press Trust of India, April 1, 2020

⁷ Finance Minister announces Rs 1.70 Lakh Crore relief package under Pradhan Mantri Garib Kalyan Yojana, Ministry of Finance, March 26, 2020