



Scavenging in India, a shame to be erased soon?

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In the wee hours, Baby1, a 30 years old scavenging women from Alwar, Rajasthan, begins her walk through the latrines of the city. She is in charge of a dozen of houses. She has to snake in and out the small path made for scavengers between houses to clean night soil. 'Night soil' is an understatement for the smelly excreta Baby has to scour everyday. People are coming out of their home and staring. Baby is caring their own excreta, and yet the owner are despising her. She has been doing this obnoxious and demeaning drudgery for a mere monthly wage of Rs 500 for a while now. She can not even remember how many years.

With bare hands, she sweeps the dejections and carries them in a bucket on her head. No need to say she has never got used to the stench of human excreta. She hates this menial job. She does know it is dirty. She is totally aware that her job is degrading, but she thinks it is her fate. She has never experienced any other kind of job. She can not read. Very often, she feels sick. "The stench forces scavengers to hold their breath, so they get affected with respiratory problem and coughs later on", explains Santosh, from Sulabh International, a local association which helps scavengers to find alternative jobs.



Baby is cleaning a latrine, Alwar, Rajasthan/ MN

Like Baby, there are about 340, 000 million toilet cleaners working in Indian villages, reports the union social welfare department. The figure could be up to one million, according to the activists. The sanitary condition in the country is appalling. More than 500 million people have no access to toilets at all, that is to say one out of two Indians. Around 700 million people defecate in open air, says Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, the founder of Sulabh International. As a result the soil is polluted and around 500,000 children die every year due to diarrhea and dehydration. This lack of hygiene also results in a tremendous inequity between men and women. The latter have to go far from their house, often when it is dark to relieve themselves far from men's view.

Most of the scavengers are Dalits, they belong to the lower cast, the Banghis, and 80 per cent of them are women. Though manual scavenging was banned in 1993, the country's toilet system still relies on scavenging. The Indian constitution made the term 'Untouchable' illegal in 1950, but scavenging is still their fate. And no one seems to care. People need their toilet to be cleaned on a daily basis and scavengers need the little money they get from this job. In poor families, toilets are even given from mother to

daughter, like a heritage. This makes it impossible for scavengers to escape such a vicious circle.

In Palam Dabri Marg, New Delhi, there is a Museum of Toilets². But it is just the tip of the iceberg. Beyond what could be seen as a funny attraction for tourists, in the same place, NGO Sulabh International has been working for more than thirty years to eradicate scavenging. Because sanitation is nothing but a very Serious matter in India. Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, a visionary Gandhian, comes from a Brahman family, so how did he happen to get involved in the sanitation movement? As he likes to recall, he once touched an Untouchable, just to see what would happen. Of course, nothing has ever happened, but his whole family was shocked and he was forced to swallow urine, cow dung and water from the Ganga to be purified. From that point, he felt he could do something to help the scavengers. He decided to dedicate his whole life to this cause. And the path was full of hurdles.



Dr Bindeshwar Pathak, in front of the sanitation lab, New Delhi / MN

In Alwar, Rajasthan, where Baby is working, a Sulabh vocational training centre named 'Nai Disha' gathers around forty former female scavengers. A few years ago, all of them were compelled to clean night soil. Their children were bound to follow them in the streets. Today, all these women are wearing turquoise saris.

It is the colour of pride that enables them to walk head-high in their town. People respect them now because they proudly speak for themselves. The problem had to be tackled both on the economic field and in the mindset of Indian villagers. Thirty years ago, the first task for Dr Pathak was to create toilets that would not require manual scavenging. He created a two-pit system toilets. Then, he had to convince people that these toilets were cleaner for the household.

He went door to door to meet and discuss with people. As a sociologist, Dr Pathak had been studying people's habit concerning toilet and hygiene in order to change their mindsets. Little by little, the villagers in Alwar started considering they could change their sanitation system. And by the same token, a lot of people's lives...

Then, once scavengers were able not to work as such anymore, alternative jobs had to be created. Today, the women of Alwar have learnt to make vermicelli and pickles³. But it was unthinkable to allow women who had been touching « shit » to work in the food business. And yet, people have started trusting them and soon, they forgot they were once cleaning night soil.

Today, these women are proud because they know people will buy and enjoy what they are preparing. On the packaging, there is no such word as 'scavenger', of course. It only says "made and prepared by women groups working for their emancipation". They are also making candles for a temple, where they were once banned from entering. They learn stitching and sewing. There are also English classes. The Sulabh ladies are dutifully repeating their English lessons like dazzled kids.



English lesson in Nai Disha, Alwar, Rajasthan/ MN

For Dr Pathak, it is very important to show the world that these women do not deserve to be treated as the scum of society. It seems like this man has no limit when his protégées's honor is at stake. In July 2008, thirty former scavenger women took part in a fashion show for the International Year of sanitation at the United Nation in New York ! They had been stitching clothes for international models and they walked down the ramp with them as more than 150 officials from different countries applauded. Lalita, a smiling roundface woman recalls this experience with gleaming eyes : *"We never even dreamt that something of that magnitude would happen to us. We had never even seen Delhi. Can you imagine we have been to New York ? We enjoyed the attention given to us"*.

Today, Sulabh International is among the successful indian organisations which were able to make a difference. But the team remains very humble. The only thing they boast about is to have transformed former waste collectors into independent, proud and free "turquoise ladies".



*On their way to customer's house with their products, Alwar, Rajasthan/MN
Marie Naudascher*

1 This is the name she gave me, but she must have an indian name.

2 www.sulbatoioletmuseum.org

3 Spicy side dish made with fruits or vegetables