



DOWN THE DRAIN!

**A study on occupational and health hazards
and the perils of contracting faced by
sewerage workers in Delhi**

A PRAXIS PUBLICATION

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and the perils of contracting faced by sewerage
workers in Delhi**



Study facilitated by

Praxis Institute for Participatory Practices, New Delhi

In collaboration with:

National Campaign for Dignity and Rights for Sewerage and
Allied Workers (NCDARSAW)

&

Occupational Health and Safety Management Consultancy
Services (OHSMCS)

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Down the Drain: A study on occupational and health hazards and the perils of contracting faced by sewerage workers in Delhi

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Table of Contents

Study Team	5
List of Abbreviations	6
Executive Summary	7
1. Sewerage workers	11
1.1 An Overview	11
1.2 Sewerage Workers in Delhi	12
1.3 Issues Faced by Sewerage workers	15
1.4 Supreme Court Directive	15
1.5 Research Objectives and Methodology	17
1.6 Study Findings and Analysis	20
2. Interlocking Oppressions: Social and Economic Identities	21
2.1 Social Status	21
2.2 Economic Condition	23
2.3 Educational Background	26
2.4 Interlocking Oppressions	28
3. Sidestepping Workers' Safety and Health	29
3.1 Exclusive Seating and Resting Place	29
3.2 Workplace Safety Norms	31
3.3 Basic Sanitation and Hygiene facilities	33
3.4 Health Hazards	34
3.5 Medical Facilities	35
3.6 Emergency and Safety	37
3.7 Adverse Health Impact on Family	39

Down the Drain!

3.8	Sewerage Workers' Safety and Health: No one's Concern	39
4.	Contracting: Economics or oppression?	41
4.1	An "Unskilled" Skill	41
4.2	Sub-Contracting: Ways and Means of Evading Government Responsibilities	44
4.3	Contracting – A Self-Perpetuating Nexus Undermining Worker Interests	47
5.	Voices for Change: Socio-Political Economy of Bargaining	51

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List of Abbreviations

CGHS	:	Central Government Health Scheme
DJB	:	Delhi Jal Board
DUSIB	:	Delhi Urban Shelter Improvement Board
JE	:	Junior Engineer
Kms	:	Kilometres
MDG	:	Millennium Development Goals
Mlpd	:	Million litres per day
MCD	:	Municipal Corporation of Delhi
NCDARSAW	:	National Campaign for Dignity and Rights for Sewerage and Allied Workers
NDMC	:	New Delhi Municipal Corporation
OHSMCS	:	Occupational Health and Safety Management Consultancy Services
PIL	:	Public Interest Litigation

Executive Summary

Rapid urbanisation and population growth, along with ever-expanding contours of cities and towns, have seen an increase in demand for sewerage and waste management services. While over one million sewerage workers are engaged in this industry in the country, they continue to struggle with precarious work conditions that include but are not limited to unsafe work practices, unsafe work environments and contractual nature of work with poor pay and benefits in what is an extremely high-risk occupation.

‘Down the Drain’ is the report of a study that was organised by Praxis in collaboration with the National Campaign for Dignity and Rights for Sewerage and Allied Workers (NCDARSAW) and Occupational Health and Safety Management Consultancy Services (OHSMCS) with sewerage workers in Delhi, with the primary objective of mainstreaming their health and safety issues. The emphasis herein is on contractual sewerage workers associated with the Delhi Jal Board (DJB).

The study was carried out using a mixed method approach including a survey, participatory tools for analysis and participatory video to amplify the direct voices of the sewerage workers so that they can assert their rights and entitlements and create a space in policy dialogues at national and global levels. The information sought was to evaluate the changes in the safety practices and procedures, training of workers, provision of personal protective equipment, health surveillance programme for the workers, acute and chronic ailments among the workers, and the number of deaths in the last two years among others. In addition to this, case stories were collected to understand broader aspects of the problem.

Some of the issues commonly faced by the participants fell in the broad categories of health-related concerns, low pay, caste-based occupation and discrimination, inbuilt stigma and prejudice in the job, lack of occupational safety measures which are further compounded by the workers' poor knowledge of existing laws and apathy from government agencies concerned. Against this background, the study covers three specific dimensions of the socio-economic status of the sewerage workers: the nature of employment, sub-contracting and its impact, and occupational safety and health issues.

The caste-based nature of the occupation continues even today despite legal enforcements, which remain confined to paper and have not translated into social change. The study found an overwhelming number of the sewerage workers interviewed (67 percent) to be from the Balmiki caste (belonging to the Dalit group), which has been the caste group traditionally employed to do sewerage work. Many workers complained of the stigma surrounding their jobs, wherein they are treated as untouchables. Considering the laborious and risky nature of the jobs, there is no compensation for injuries occurring within the work site.

The contractual nature of the jobs as well as the low pay put a heavy burden on the workers, with a majority of them having 3-5 dependants. This, in turn, impacts their living standards, and access to water and sanitation, food intake, education and living conditions. Those who are not employed permanently by the Delhi Jal Board earn twice as less compared to the permanent employees, and have to send their spouse or children to work to supplement their incomes.

While most of the sewerage workers are provided an exclusive space called 'stores', these lack essential facilities such as a place to relax, eat, proper ventilation and fans and first aid boxes. There is a glaring absence of workplace safety norms, with most equipment not being available or being inadequate or in poor condition. Even drinking water and sanitation facilities were unavailable. Despite a Supreme Court directive in 2011 to the government to provide for these essentials and improve standards of the workplace, the situation continues as before. Though the nature of the job puts the workers' health and life at extreme

hazard, over 57 percent did not have any kind of insurance cover.

Participants of the study identified the common perception of sewerage work as unskilled and its roots in caste-based politics and prejudice as some of the fundamental reasons why this problem continues unaddressed. Government subcontracting of sewerage work has become a way of evading responsibility and enacting long-term occupational changes that could have a meaningful impact in society.

Finally, the contractual workers who participated in the study identified a set of demands and a timeline under which they could be achieved. Things that needed immediate attention were identity cards, provisions for full body suits and the publicisation of names and terms of contracts on a website. Short-term demands were recognition of the sewerage work as a technical work, access to all safety equipment and social audits of the workplaces and contractors. Doing away with sub-contracting, mechanisation that works with a human interface and orientation to safety norms and practices featured as some of the long-term demands. This can only be achieved with greater political will and by challenging the deep-rooted social perceptions related to sewerage work.





Chapter 1

Sewerage workers

1.1 An Overview

Over one million¹ sewerage workers in India are involved in the sanitation and hygiene of our surroundings. They have historically been responsible for plunging bare-bodied into clogged sewers² filled with fermented faeces, urine and other chronic waste flushed down by millions³ to clean this with their hands, without the use of safety equipment. The demand for sewer and waste management services has always been high because of the rising population in cities as well as the vast urbanisation of the country clubbed with expanding geographical limits of the existing cities. Contract work, unsafe work practices and apathy of the concerned authorities have been responsible for the increased vulnerability of these sewerage workers. The frequent accidental deaths and illnesses among the sewerage workers have been only sporadically reported, as it does not make for saleable news. A few studies that have been undertaken on the health and safety issues of these workers, such as Hole to Hell⁴ have established the significant occupational morbidity and mortality among sewerage workers. Some of these studies have triggered an enabling policy environment around the conditions of work and health and safety norms, but despite these, the working conditions of the sewerage workers have remained virtually unchanged for over a century.

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1. Occupational Health Hazards In Sewerage And Sanitary Workers, Rajnarayan R. Tiwari, 2008
 2. Sewer Rats, Vidya Venkat, April 2009
 3. Lack Of Safety Gear Killing Delhi's Sewer Workers, IANS
 4. Hole To Hell: A Study On Health & Safety Status Of Sewerage Workers In Delhi, 2006

Praxis, in collaboration with Nidan, had facilitated a study on the lives and working conditions of sanitation workers in Patna, Bihar. The report, *A Legacy of Stench*⁵, attempted to highlight the unjust, inhuman and compromised conditions of sanitation workers, who have been relegated to a status of extreme disdain and exclusion. In order to build on this, the current study, *Down the Drain*, was organised with sewerage workers in Delhi, with the primary objective of mainstreaming their health and safety issues. The study was carried out using a mixed method approach including a survey, participatory tools for analysis and participatory video to amplify the direct voices of the sewerage workers so that they can assert their rights and entitlements and create a space in the policy dialogues at national and global levels.

The study is directly relevant to the Supreme Court Cases on the issue of problems faced by contractual workers and on their occupational safety and health. Further, the participatory video film and the study will be used to bring the direct voices of the sewerage workers into the global processes on evolving the Post-Millennium Development Goals agenda.

1.2 Sewerage Workers in Delhi

As is the case with the entire country, sewerage workers in Delhi still enter sewers to clean them manually.⁶ According to a petition filed by the National Campaign for Dignity and Rights of Sewerage and Allied Workers versus the Municipal Corporation of Delhi and others, they wear the bare minimum, they descend narrow manhole shafts into depths of often more than 10 feet, and pick away at sewerage blockages with nothing more than a hoe or their hands. They regularly become submerged in sewerage to their knees or waists, and sometimes their entire body becomes immersed.

The total quantity of sewerage generated in Delhi is 2,871

5. Available for download from <http://www.socialequitywatch.org/download-publications.html>

6. National Campaign for Dignity and Rights of Sewerage and Allied Workers vs. MCD & others, 2007 <http://hrln.org/hrln/dalit-rights/pils-a-cases/111-national-campaign-for-dignity-and-rights-of-sewerage-and-allied-workers-vs-mcd-a-others.html#ixzz2sWLRBmjP>

mld (million litres a day).⁷ The Delhi Jal Board is responsible for treatment and disposal of waste water through a network of about 5,600 km of internal, peripheral and trunk sewers and about 150,000 manholes for which it employs approximately 5,500 sewerage workers to maintain the sewerage system and other related works.⁸ The working conditions for sewerage workers are such that they are not only exposed to high risk against numerous noxious substances, but they also face suffocation and the possibility of accidental deaths while working. Health experts state that the life expectancy of sewerage workers is ten years less than the national average.⁹

Historically and culturally in India, the management of sewerage, from dry latrines to water closet toilets has been bestowed on one particular community/caste i.e. Balmikis. Although there is prohibition of the employment of manual scavengers as well as a ban on the construction or continuance of dry latrines under the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993, this situation still persists in many parts of India. Under this act it is provided that no human agency shall be employed to carry the night soil on his/her head. But, in the case of sewerage work, there is even more direct involvement of the worker with the waste and filth when a sewer worker immerses his bare body in sewerage water to clear the sewer line.

The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, defines a manual scavenger as “a person engaged in or employed for manually carrying human excreta”. This definition was circumscribed in a way that it left out sewerage workers and this persuaded the central government to introduce a new legislation. The new law, The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013, is more elaborate and inclusive. It defines manual scavenger as a person engaged or employed,

7. *ibid*

8. *Untouchability in the Capital: A historical judgement by the Delhi High Court*, Dalit Adhikar Shaudh Evam Sandarbh Kendra, Dalit and Human Rights Law Network, Delhi, 2008

9. *Lack Of Safety Gear Killing Delhi's Sewer Workers*, IANS

at the commencement of this Act or at any time thereafter, by an individual or a local authority or an agency or a contractor for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in an open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed, or on a railway track or in such other spaces or premises, as the central government or a state government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such manner as may be prescribed. For the purpose of this clause,

“Engaged or employed” means being engaged or employed on a regular or contract basis;

“A person engaged or employed to clean excreta with the help of such devices and using such protective gear as the central government may notify in this behalf shall not be deemed to be a ‘manual scavenger’”.¹⁰

Reports of deaths of sewerage workers in the capital make it to news reports every once in a while but leave the public’s mind just as rapidly. It is reported, “about 100 workers die every year while entering the confined space at high temperatures, with slippery walls and floor, and in the presence of toxic gases, sharps, chemicals, and insects.”¹¹ Besides the high risk of the job, they are also exposed to certain health problems by virtue of their occupation. These health hazards include exposure to harmful gases, cardiovascular degeneration, musculoskeletal disorders, infections, skin problems and respiratory system problems.¹² In addition, the workers also face constant verbal abuse from road users and local gentry for obstructing car movement and spreading dirt, working under constant fear from the surrounding traffic, and experiencing social humiliation and discrimination because of their lower caste status. There is a lot to be done before agencies like MCD (Municipal Corporation of Delhi) take cognisance of these issues and employ or contract sewerage workers who are compelled to work in unsafe and unsanitary conditions.

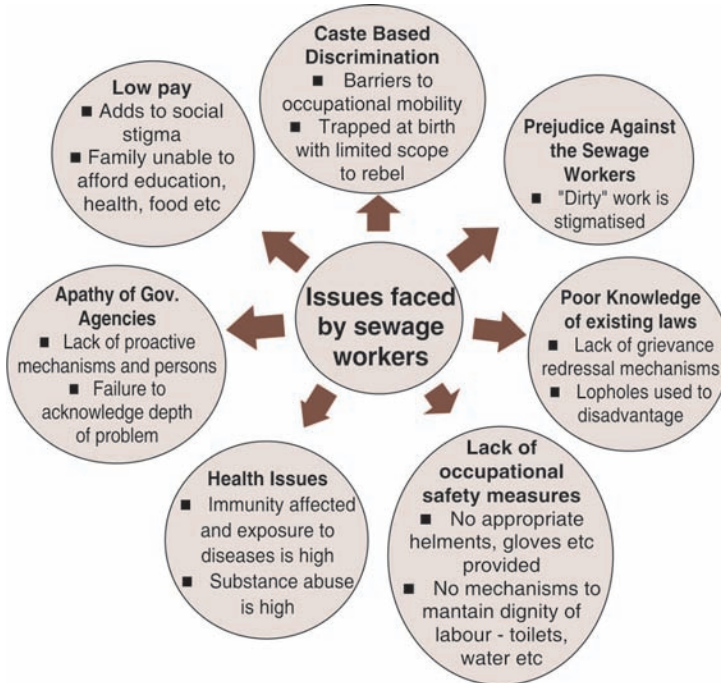
10. The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013’, Ministry of Law and Justice, the Gazette of India, 2013.

11. Whose City, Indian Seminar, Dunu Roy, 2013

12. Occupational Health Hazards In Sewerage And Sanitary Workers, Rajnarayan R. Tiwari, 2008

1.3 Issues faced by sewerage workers

Sewerage workers across the country face several issues. While some issues are exacerbated based on the geographical and specific cultural context, most workers face the issues listed in the figure below to varying degrees:



1.4 Supreme Court Directive

On 12th July, 2011, in the case of DJB Vs. NCDRSAW¹³ the Supreme Court held that the State could not “absolve themselves of the responsibility to put in place effective mechanisms for ensuring safety of the workers employed for maintaining and cleaning the sewerage system”. The Supreme Court has recognised the plight of sewerage workers and the high risks they

13. Civil Appeal No. 5322 of 2011

face in their jobs as amounting to a denial of their fundamental rights of equality, life and liberty. Hence, the Supreme Court pulled up the central government for its callousness in not enacting a law to ban manual scavenging and criticised the government for being insensitive to the safety and well being of the workers. Numerous directives provided by the Supreme Court are outlined below:

- Free medical examination and treatment to sewer workers and continuation of treatment until recovery or payment of compensation to those suffering from any occupational disease, ailment or accident in accordance with the provisions of the Workmen's Compensation Act, 1923.
- The employer shall pay on the death of any worker, including any contract worker, an immediate ex gratia solatium of Rs 1 lakh.
- The Delhi Jal Board is directed to ensure that the ex-gratia payment in case of deaths of sewer workers has been paid to the families of deceased workmen, (and if not) release the same within a period of eight weeks
- Sewer workers, including contract workers, shall get the payment of all statutory dues such as provident fund, gratuity and bonus.
- Workers shall be provided with all possible modern protective equipment
- Employers shall provide soap and oil to all the workmen
- Workers should be provided with restrooms and canteens, first-aid facilities, safe drinking water, washing facilities, latrines and urinals, shelters and crèches. These are to be provided at what are known as 'stores' or places where the workers assemble to give their attendance and from where they depart to their respective work sites.

1.5 Research Objectives and Methodology

Praxis has been facilitating studies to enable marginalised and vulnerable sections of society to engage in policy dialogues in the Post-MDG development agenda setting process. Their voices are

reflected in the media only when there is any untoward incident such as death or accidents. The numerous workers who suffer health and personal consequences as a result of sewerage work go unreported and stay on the fringes of society. This study is a multi-method study involving the participation of sewerage workers not only in data collection but also in scripting frameworks and analysing the information collected. Their participation in the entire study process ensures that their voices are captured in such a way that their views and dignity remain protected.

The primary focus of the study was towards assessing the current health and safety issues of sewerage workers in Delhi with the intention being to further intensify the protection of these workers. The information sought was to evaluate the changes in the safety practices and procedures, training of workers, provision of personal protective equipment, health surveillance programme for the workers, acute and chronic ailments among the workers, and number of deaths in last two years among others. In addition, case stories were collected to understand broader aspects of the problem. In this particular study, the key emphasis has been on **contractual sewerage workers** associated with the Delhi Jal Board (DJB). While in the initial design, the plan was to also interact with female sewerage workers, it was mutually agreed that the female workers required an exclusive study. While this report highlights a case or two of female sewerage workers, a separate study is underway to capture the issues and problems faced by them.

Invisible Female Sewerage Workers

As mentioned, a separate study is being planned with women sewerage workers. Here is a snapshot of the issues of invisible female sewerage workers.

Women do not go down the drain, but often it becomes the responsibility of women workers to clean the waste which sewerage workers bring up from the drain. Handling this waste without protection kits is harmful to health. Sunita is working as a Beldar at DJB. She does the cleaning work, whereas Rekha has been working as a sweeper for the last 11 months at DUSIB.

She handles waste with her bare hands as safety equipment is not provided to her. She is keen to have safety equipment and an identity, along with a better salary.

The study was organised across the National Capital Territory of Delhi in a phased manner. As part of the first stage, a survey on health and safety issues was carried out based on a predetermined questionnaire. This was conducted at the available 'stores' at different locations across Delhi. A total of 58 sewerage workers (known as beldars) were interviewed with the help of a questionnaire. The sewer beldars were interviewed randomly from three areas i.e. residential 41% (24 beldars), commercial 34% (20 beldars) and industrial 25% (14 beldars). The store-wise breakup of these areas is given in Table no. 1.

Table No. 1: Store wise distribution of workers interviewed across Delhi (n = 58)					
Residential Area	No. of workers	Commercial Area	No. of workers	Industrial Area	No. of workers
Dakshin Puri	3	Amrit Kaur Market	2	Khajan Basti	3
Khanpur	2	Chandni Chowk	12	Mayapuri	8
R K Puram	5	Karol Bag	4	Wazirpur	3
Rohini	5	Mori Gate	2		
Subhash Nagar	9				
Total	24 (41%)		20 (34%)		14 (25%)

As part of the second phase of the study, a set of participatory tools was used to analyse the root causes of different problems faced by the sewerage workers and construct a stakeholder analysis to decipher why their problems remain unaddressed. The following tools were used

- **Card sorting:** This tool was used to unpack the nuances of the sewerage worker context and identify some of the key issues faced by the workers in their work and personal lives
- **Problem tree:** This tool was used to explore the various causes behind the issues that the sewerage workers

face. The inter-linkages between the root causes and the other factors was established and then the subsequent consequences and effects of these were also identified using this tool

- **Before and now:** This tool was used to understand the historical context of the sewerage workers' lives as well as trace the changes that have taken place in various aspects of the profession, conditions, contexts and lives of workers

This was followed by a participatory video exercise wherein sewerage workers scripted a story on their situation and then filmed and edited it. The film was made with the purpose of ensuring that the independent voices of the workers find visibility in the public domain for policy influencing.

Some snapshots of the research process are below:



1.6 Study Findings and Analysis

The study on sewerage workers covers three dimensions of their socio-economic status:

1. Nature of employment,
2. Sub-contracting and its effects
3. Occupational safety and health issues

Each of these issues have been thoroughly discussed and

Down the Drain!

studied. A set of draft findings of the survey was presented to a group of sewerage workers. This information was analysed by them and subsequently used by them script a story for their participatory video film. The study conclusions and inferences have been informed by the group discussions. The next four chapters are outcomes of a participatory analysis with a group of sewerage workers.



Chapter 2

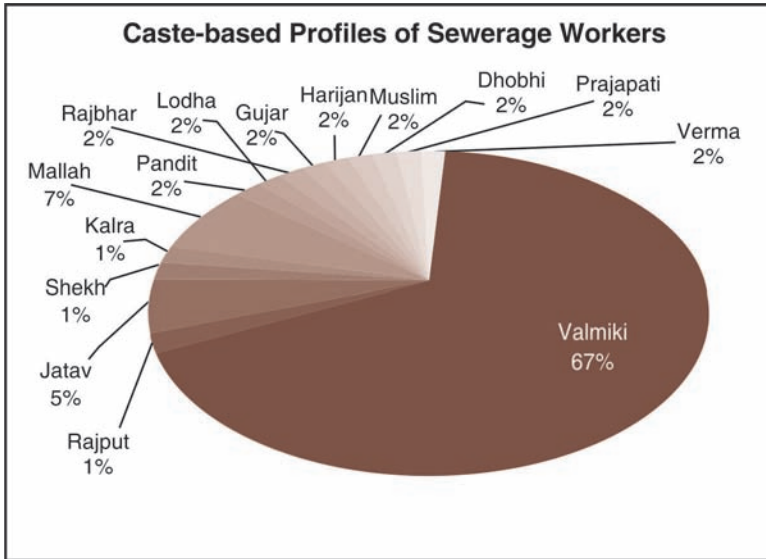
Interlocking Oppressions: Social and Economic Identities

Urbanisation in India is progressing very rapidly with the current rate of urbanisation at 31% according to the 2011 census and an estimated 40% by 2030, according to the UN State of the World Population report of 2007. Towns have expanded into cities, cities into mega-cities and metropolitan areas now being subsumed by cities. The booming economy and increasing urban population need support systems and services. Service providers include a mixed category of skilled, semi-skilled and unskilled, with each having a distinctive role to play in the building of the cities. Sewerage workers are one such cadre providing a crucial service to the large urban population. This section of the report sheds light on the identities of the sewerage workers in Delhi.

2.1 Social Status

While taking the leap towards modernisation, it has been perceived that society has been moving beyond the traditional realm of caste-based discrimination. Would this perceived change in attitude be applicable in the case of sewerage workers as well? Ved Prakash, a trade union member at Delhi Jal Board and a research participant, states, “Unfortunately, sewerage work is linked to caste and people think that only Dalits and those of lower caste perform this work”. Sewer cleaning and similar activities were earlier restricted to and performed only by certain castes. Restricting occupational possibilities was an important mechanism to segregate and maintain control over the social structure. The same continues to this day. Ved continues, “It is a way of keeping us down. They do not provide us with any facility,

so that people from this caste stay like this. They feel that we are bonded labourers and slaves and make us work like that.” This practice has continued to contemporary times. However, it has now transformed into a very systematic form. The caste details of study participants is presented below:



The study revealed that out of the 58 respondents, 67% were from the Balmiki¹⁴ caste, 7% from Jatav community and 3% are from the Lodha community. The participants of the study were largely from three states – a majority of workers were from Delhi (50), while five were from different districts of Haryana and three from Uttar Pradesh.

Owing to their socio-economic background, government agencies have been systematically ignoring their interests.

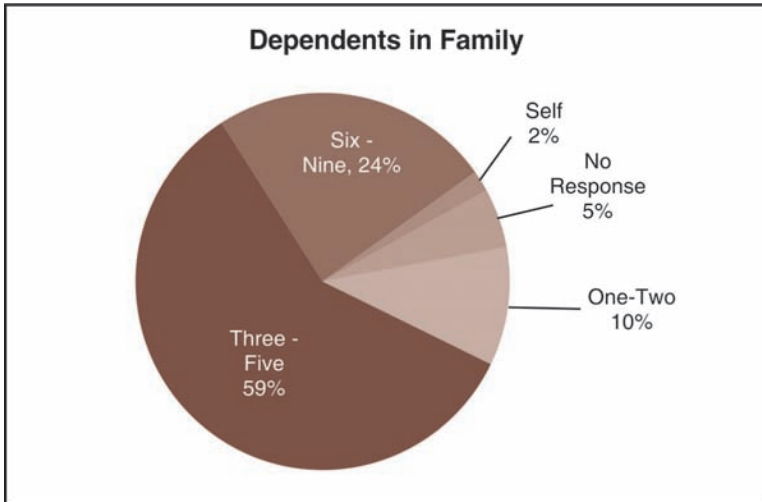
14. Balmiki is one of the largest socially stigmatised Dalit groups numbering nearly 1.5 million in Uttar Pradesh alone and constituting about 16% of India's population. Balmikis occupy the lowest position on the caste system. The stigma remains as they are still identified with the work they perform and are considered untouchable and treated as such. They have always been marginalised and treated as outcasts socially, economically and culturally. (Balmiki - People groups of India, 2011)

Ashok Taank from the National Campaign for Dignity shared that government agencies knowingly do not provide facilities for this group, because they believe that if there are better salaries, packages and medical facilities for them or their children then this group (Dalits) will progress. They will rise up the social ladder and their children will be in a better place. Immense power is exercised over them as there is a sense of threat that if this group rises from its present position then there will be no one to do this cleaning work”.

Segregation at institutional and social level leads to untouchability and discrimination. The workers experience discrimination in their daily professional lives. One of the workers, Mahendra Singh, points out, “When we ask for water while working, they give us water from a distance. They believe that we are of lower caste. They feel that if they touch us, they will become polluted.” Mahendra is not the only one who feels this way. His co-worker Ravi Kumar echoes, “While working, I asked somebody for water. After a thought he got us water. But he gave it from a distance. He was hesitant to come closer to us, as if he would contract some illness. They treat us as untouchable”. Another sewerage worker says, “The social stigma related to the occupation is so intense that there is prohibition on any discussion about it. We clean others dirt and people in turn regard us as dirty,” says Mahendra Singh. What several study participants echoed is that people regarded their work as “menial” and that because their clothes were dirty and smelly, people felt that touching sewerage workers would transfer the same.

2.2 Economic Condition

Exploitation and low income also play key roles in contributing to the drudgery of these workers. Mathura Das says, “I have been working as a sewerage worker since 1986. There is no one to hear my plight. I get very low salary.” He currently earns Rs. 4500 a month and his family of five have been surviving on this income. Many workers are employed on a contractual basis. Mathura Das’ case is not unique. There are many others like him who face a similar fate. For them each day’s work is an endless battle for survival and in return for their struggle, they get paid a very small



amount.

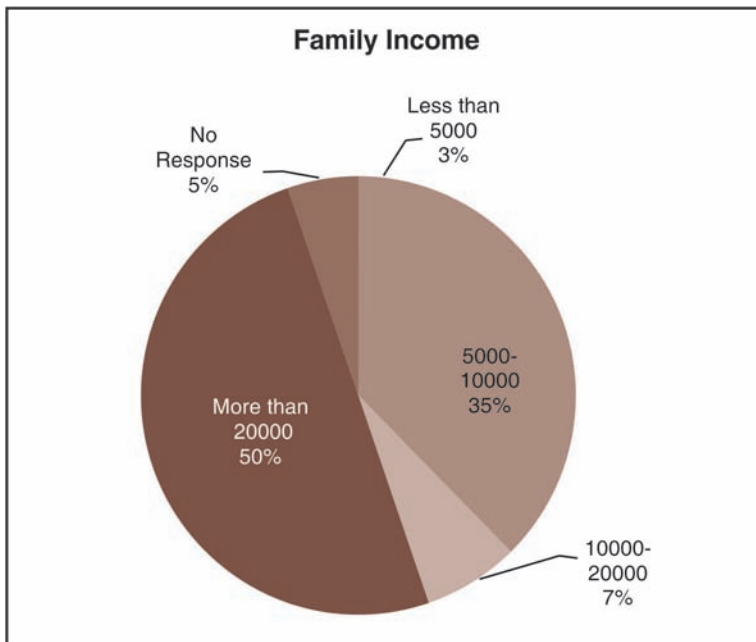
Says another sewerage worker, “I have been working for 5 years and its only a year ago that my salary was increased by Rs 600.” They are deprived of basic privileges. “Salary is deducted if we take leave for injuries incurred during our work,” says a sewerage worker. “I am paid just half the salary which I am supposed to get,” claims another. The work is laborious and inhuman as most of the job involves working with bare hands and without any protection. The compensation for such a risky occupation is very less. Ashok Taank, a participant, voices his concern: “The salary package is so less that the worker is not able to take care of all his needs.”

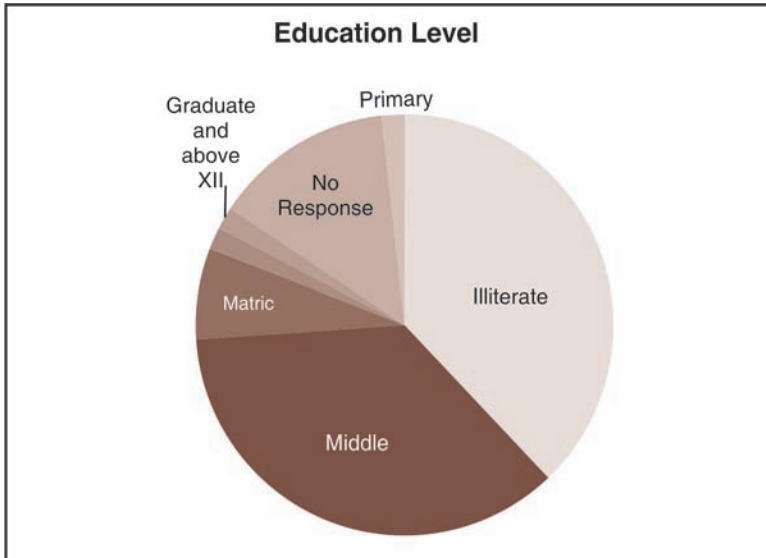
The family size of participants in the study ranged from three to nine. More than 59% respondents expressed that the number of dependents (number of family members financially dependent on the interviewee) were more than 3. The figure alongside shows that for almost 24% of the respondents it had crossed 6, on average it was observed that the mean of the dependent ratio was close to 5. This further burdens the sewerage worker’s ability to break free from the circle of poverty.

Owing to a low income and high dependency ratio, education,

water & sanitation, food intake, and living circumstances are compromised. The sewerage worker form their own living spaces, which are typically unhygienic and devoid of basic facilities.” One study participant shared, “Here in Delhi, everything has a cost for us. We have to pay for toilets, bath, schools and health. How can we manage in this income?” Health is another major expense area for the sewerage workers as most of them are not medically insured. “Out of Rs 4500 per month, we get about Rs 2500 or 2700 after deduction. In this small amount what can one do? How can you take care of children and family?” asks Mahendra Singh. They continue to work primarily with the hope that at some point in time, they will get a permanent government job.

Almost 37% respondents shared that their monthly income was less than Rs 10,000 whereas almost 50% mentioned that it was above Rs 20,000. This second category comprises permanent workers with Delhi Jal Board, working for more than ten years. Those who are regular employees of DJB earn twice as much as contractual workers. The contractual workers





earn between Rs 5,000 and Rs 10,000 per month based on the number of visits to clean sewers in colonies. The incentive of being made a permanent employee motivates the sewerage workers to continue to struggle. Says one worker, “If we are not made permanent employees, there is nothing in this job.” Clearly, the current livelihood does not fulfil the needs of the family. Even so, the temporary status of their livelihood forces them to explore other income avenues. “Owing to high dependency, some of us have to engage in any form of labour that is available on a given day. My wife has to go for ‘bartan’ (washing vessels in houses) or my child has to go and work for anything.”

2.3 Educational Background

The ill effects of sewerage work affect not just the workers but their families as well. The son of Mathura Das, a sewerage worker, says, “Because my father did not have permanent employment we faced a lot of problems... our education suffered... We do not have proper jobs... You can understand what happens when you do not have proper jobs”.

The study found that the 58 interviewed workers had a mixed educational background. While only 2% were graduates, 36%

workers had completed their middle school education. The rest of them had either some basic schooling or were non-literate. There are also some people who take up such jobs owing to lack of alternate employment opportunities. They are under employed. A large number of the workers (14%) did not want to disclose their education background. This is possibly because they were ashamed to be working as sewerage workers despite having a good education.

Family Stigma

Sonu (name changed) is a 10-year-old boy. He used to live in a small village of Ballia district, Uttar Pradesh with his mother and grandparents. He knew that his father worked in a government department in Delhi and he and his mother always wanted to live with his father. This had not been possible as his father, knowing that he could not manage expenses, had not called them to the city to live with him.

After much persistence from his family, Sonu's father finally gave in and Sonu and his mother went to live in Delhi. Initially they were very happy but Sonu was denied admission in school and he and his mother became very upset. They assumed that school admission would not be a problem in Delhi as his father had a government job.

What they did not know is that Sonu's father was working with the DJB as sewer beldar for ten years and also hailed from a backward caste, which added to the stigma associated with the job. He had never shared the details of his job with his wife or other family members and was willing to let his son forego an education rather than seek help from the department and risk revealing his job profile to his family. He was scared that if they came to know what he did, no one would respect him.

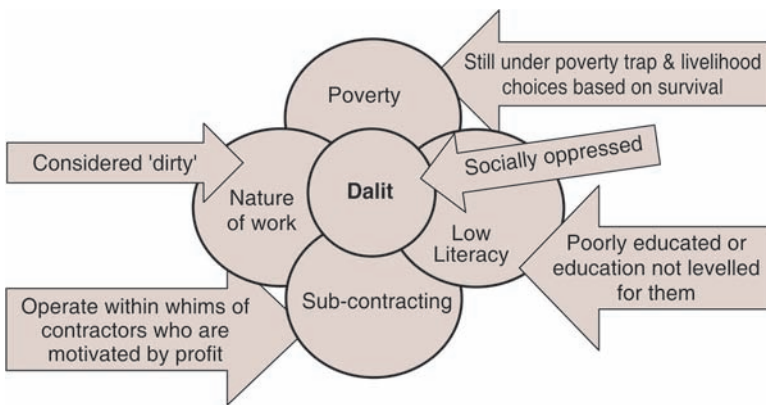
This is not a one-off case where a father or husband has not disclosed their job profile to their family.

The study came across several cases of sewerage workers who are discriminated against by the public even though they are doing public service like other government employees. They face social criticism and censure. They do not get support from the neighbourhood people when they go for work and in some cases

are even denied drinking water. They face harassment from the police when working despite the fact that they too are government employees.

2.4 Interlocking Oppressions

A sewerage worker generally hail from the socially oppressed section of society (Dalits), performs a job which is seen as “dirty” by larger society and is invariably poor for he would not be making this choice for a wage which is so minimal and which requires him to act on the diktat of a contractor. All these marginalisation do not work in a static way, they operate in a dynamic way resisting any efforts towards empowerment. Despite attempts at unionising the workers or even certain benevolent judgments from the High Courts and the Supreme Court, the situation has not changed much.



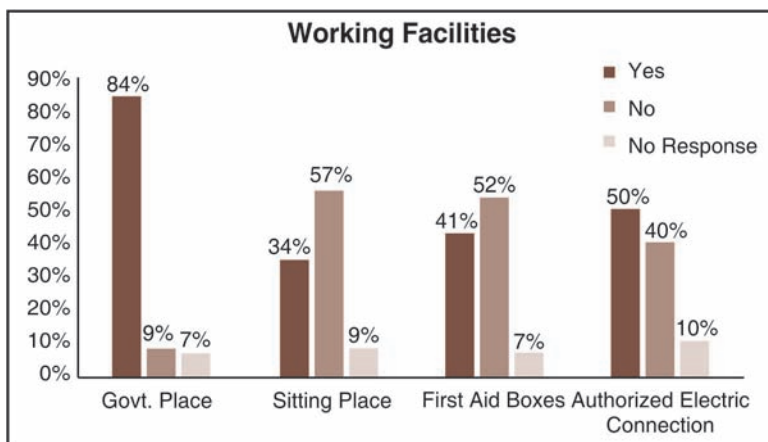


Chapter 3

Sidestepping Workers' Safety and Health

Sewerage workers are hardly provided with any proper protective gear and they have no knowledge of whom to appeal to for a change in their situation. This chapter explores some of the responses of the sewerage workers pertaining to their daily work lives, and about the issues of their health and safety.

3.1 Exclusive Seating and Resting Place



Sewerage workers operate from offices, which are called 'stores'. There are many stores across Delhi to maintain smooth functioning of sewers and to act on complaints of sewer blockage. DJB has divided them into Main and Subsidiary stores. Small or Subsidiary stores are meant for sewer cleaning operations. Main stores are situated in structured offices with all facilities, but

small stores are established with mostly informal and temporary arrangements.

It is surprising to note that more than 84% respondents reported an exclusive space provided by the government for the stores. The remaining are not exclusive sewer stores, but a part of government premises, meant for some other functions. It is important to note here that a few small stores are constructed in public parks, which, at some point in time, have been reconstructed after the park authority demolished it.

The stark reality is that the stores that are operational are not conducive to the needs of the workers. They are very small and these have to serve the purpose of not just seating space but also other purposes including storage of materials, equipment required for sewer cleaning, scrap yards and maintenance sheds. Almost 57% of respondents have stated that they do not have a fit place for sitting and workers have to make their own arrangements. Proper protection, for example, locks and security arrangements are also not provided at the working place and it has to be managed by the workers. Chand, one of the respondents, says “You can witness it yourself - we do not have anything clean here for us to feel good about”. Another colleague of his added, “we have no place to sit, relax or eat our food. There are no fans, no facilities for us”.

Only 50% of respondents stated that their operating places have authorised electricity connections. As DJB has mainly taken over spaces belonging to different government institutions, the electrical connection is still in the previous department's name. Using this connection results in a tussle between the DJB and other departments over payment of bills, which is then settled by senior officers. Electrical fittings in the stores are very basic, and are meant to serve basic electrical needs. Many fittings do not comply with safety standards.

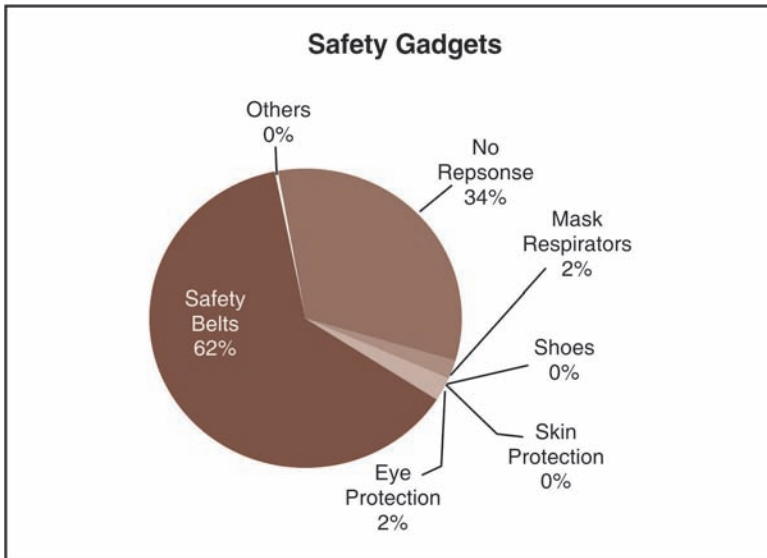
It is unfortunate that more than 50% of respondents stated that their workspaces do not have first-aid boxes. Even where they are available, they are not used. Authorities only pay lip service in the name of safety and no medical trainings are provided to the sewerage workers to familiarise them with the use of emergency kits.

3.2 Workplace Safety Norms

Basic human rights cannot be denied to people who are working and rendering services to the larger community. However, if one looks at the condition of sewerage workers then a grotesque picture, wherein workers have been subjugated and marginalised, comes to light. Work health and safety aims and welfare of workers at work has been severely compromised in the case of sewerage workers.

The basic equipment available for sewer workers is a safety belt that is used to go down into the sewers for cleaning. Other equipment is either not available or shared by workers. Even the safety belts are often not in good condition - they are not strong and can cause harm to the workers. Sewerage workers are not provided with any other protective gear. Says Govind Rai, "I work with my bare hands in the filth. Some blade or some wire in it could cut me. If I get hurt then I have to pay from my pocket."

In a PIL in the Supreme Court over the unavailability of any safety equipment like gas cylinders, breathing masks, safety goggles etc, the Supreme Court (2011) has criticised the Government for not making available such basic requirements

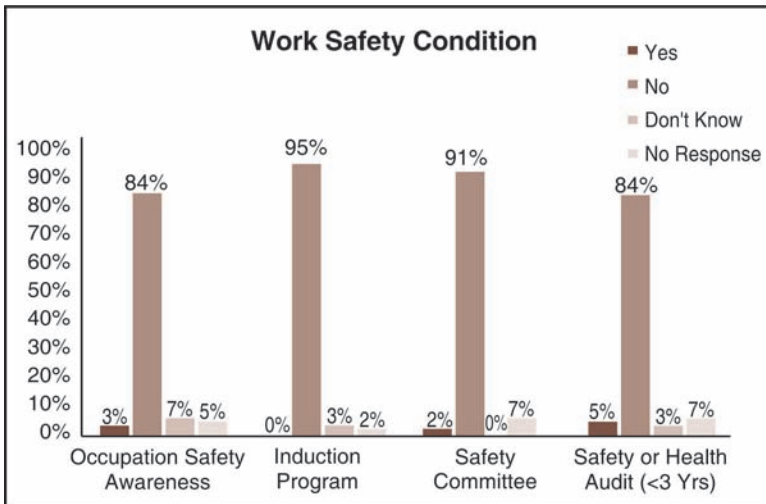


and risking lives of numerous workers. The Supreme Court has directed the government to immediately provide the essentials and improve the standards of operations. However, it still remains a distant reality.

The sewerage workers have to waste a lot of time waiting for equipment to become available. This is because of the sharing arrangement for equipment between workers. Available safety gear is not in good shape and most of it is non-functional. Workers put the blame on the seniors for not procuring the gadgets and stated that long lists of equipment purchase are pending with the department. Some workers who did not wish to be named hinted at the corruption in procurement and processing.

Thus, for the safety of sewerage workers, responsible agencies should provide workers with the things they demand for. A respondent Mahendra Singh demanded, "We need one plough, one life jacket and one pair of goggles. We need helmets that are fitted with light. We also need gloves, shoes, jackets etc. If these things are given to us then could work better but these things are denied. Why is it that we are deprived of these things? Our contractor is responsible for this."

Above 84% respondents were completely unaware of safety requirements. They have peer sharing about the risks but in a crude and unorganised form. There is no systemic material

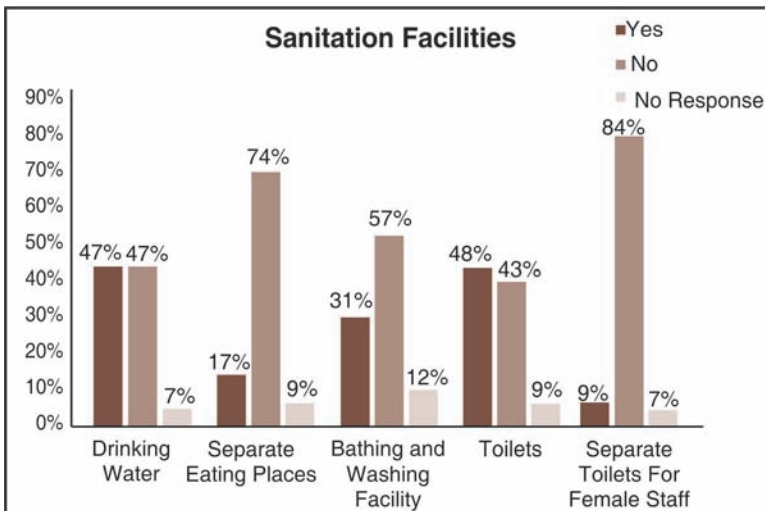


or readings available on the subject for the workers. Almost all respondents (95%) admit that they have not been part of any type of induction programme on 'safe working'. There are no such provisions in their working manual and if there was, most of them were unaware about such provisions. The only learning that they gain is from their peers.

As per the safety provisions, a committee is required to be operational but no such provisions have been reported by any of the respondents. Very few have talked about such committees and even those who have mentioned, said they are not operational. There has been no stock taking of security threats or safety concerns of workers. There is no systematic information collection on the safety requirement of workers. In circumstances of major injuries or fatal accidents during work, a departmental enquiry is instituted in name to complete the paper work.

3.3 Basic Sanitation and Hygiene Facilities

During field visits it was observed that big stores have drinking water and toilet facilities. Only 47% respondents said that they have appropriate facilities of drinking water. Only 8% of respondents have said that there are places that had separate toilet facilities for women staff.

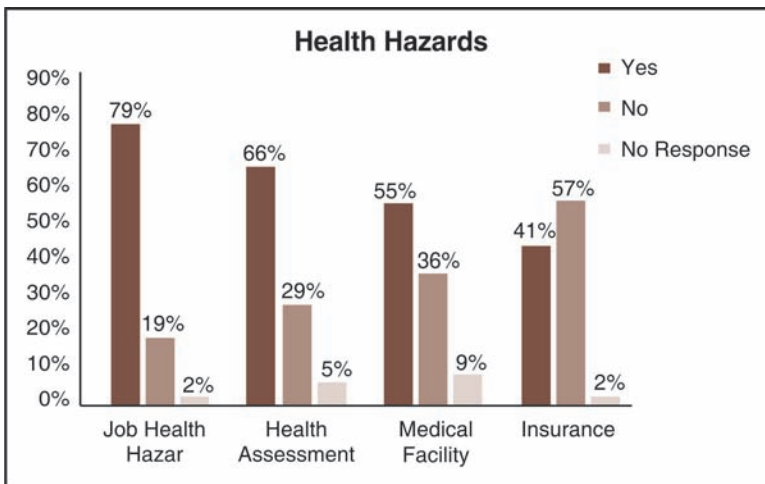


Bathing and washing facilities are very important for sewerage workers as they need these as soon as they come back from field operations. But surprisingly, it is not available. Respondents mentioned that they are not provided with any soap or oil. When asked about bathing and washing facilities, only 31% workers have said that they have proper access to these facilities. The remaining made informal arrangements like using hand-pumps.

3.4 Health Hazards

Respondents were aware about health hazards related to their job profile and almost 66% respondents reported some sort of health disorder during their job tenure.

Danger is very much a part of the sewerage worker's life. However, more than 57% of the respondents did not have life insurance. Though 41% did mention their insurance cover, there is very little awareness about the amount and the policy. According to a respondent, "an insurance agent made an analogy where he referred to terrorist attack on Mumbai in 2009 where a police officer was denied an insurance cover because he put himself in a dangerous situation. A similar situation could arise for sewerage workers as they also put themselves into a toxic environment. The Mumbai case was highlighted due to the heroic act of the officer where as these unheard workers would be in a tough spot under



such conditions. Therefore, it is important to communicate with them the term of their insurance as well as negotiating with the agency to include all cases.”

Very few workers are covered under the National Health Insurance Scheme. The permanent employees have the option of a deductible component from their salary, which goes towards maintaining an insurance plan. Owing to the low wages and the optional status of the same, it is not very effective. One of the respondents mentioned that government agencies deliberately do not provide insurance facilities to this section of society owing to their caste status. Most of the sewerage workers are traditionally from Dalit communities. They feel that they are denied basic rights like good salary package and medical facilities for their children because of a larger social anxiety related to the upward mobility of the lower caste communities. It is feared that if they achieve a better social standing and dignity, then the next generation would not want to take up jobs considered lowly like sewer cleaning. Hence, the lack of initiative in bettering the working conditions can be understood.

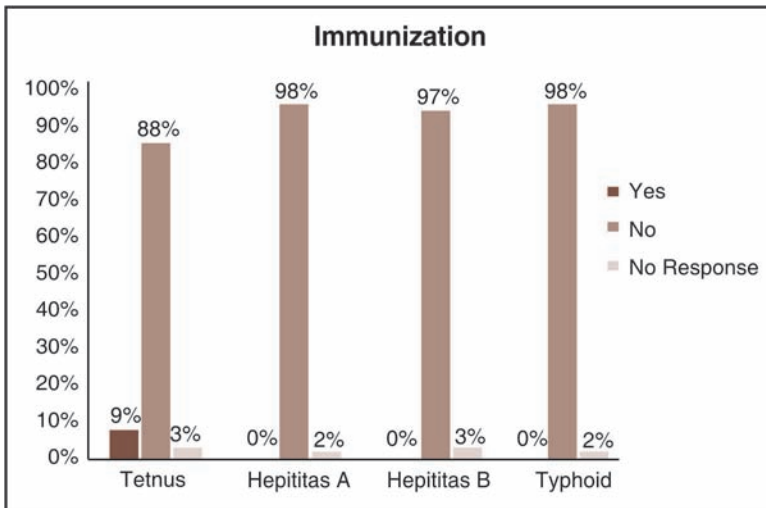
3.5 Medical Facilities

DJB has empanelled hospitals for hospitalisation and treatment of sewerage workers and provides access to dispensaries for minor illness and treatment. All regular employees have health cards, which includes details of their dependants, for accessing these dispensaries. For major treatments, these dispensaries refer the patient to preferred or nearby hospitals. The facility of hospitalisation and treatment is on a reimbursement basis - the employee has to spend money up front and can have it reimbursed as per agreed norms and procedures.

DJB has started regular health check-ups of sewerage workers who are vulnerable to many diseases due to exposure of toxic gases and chemical substances during their work. Sewer gases include hydrogen sulphide, ammonia, methane, carbon dioxide, sulphur dioxide and nitrogen oxides. Improper disposal of petroleum products such as gasoline and mineral spirits also contribute to sewer gas hazards. Exposure to low levels of this chemical can irritate the eyes, lead to coughing or sore

throat, shortness of breath, and fluid accumulation in the lungs. Prolonged low-level exposure may cause fatigue, pneumonia, loss of appetite, headache, irritability, poor memory, and dizziness. In the long run, it causes many terminal diseases. Thus periodic medical examinations are essential to recognise the occupational diseases at the earliest and institute a preventive health programme for the workers. The sewerage workers who are under permanent employment with DJB require their health check-ups done every six months.

Out of 58 sewer workers interviewed, only 38 (a mix of regular and contractual workers) have undergone the periodic medical check-ups. An average of three medical examinations have been done for these 38 workers in last three years. These workers have undergone a blood test, urine test, sputum examination and chest X-rays in the last 2-3 years. However, they are unaware of the outcome of their medical examination. Their medical examination does not correspond to the type of work they are doing. The generic medical examination devoid of occupational history, specific examination to diagnose occupational diseases without sharing the results with the stakeholders, or counselling of the workers are part of an eyewash to complete the paper work to comply with the Supreme Court orders.



Sewerage workers shared that they are assigned a nursing home to get their medical check-ups done. None of the workers are satisfied with the procedures of medical check-ups as they feel that no real benefit is being gained from these medical check-ups. All of them said that each time, their blood, sputum and urine samples are taken and chest X-rays done, doctors never physically examine them. They feel that doctors do not like to “touch us”. Their perception seems to be true, as many necessary examinations like eye examination or skin examination were not done.

Immunisation against crucial diseases is very important for these sewerage workers who come into contact with waste containing viruses. It includes immunisation against Tetanus, Hepatitis-A, Hepatitis-B and Typhoid. Of the 58 respondents, only 5 people had been immunised against these deadly diseases and of these they paid to get a tetanus shot administered.

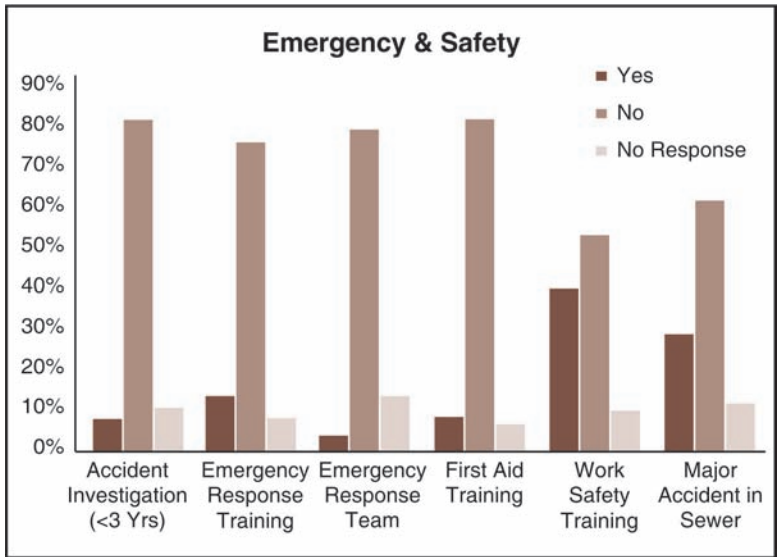
Contract workers have no access to medical facilities and tests by design. A few workers have undergone these tests due to proactive efforts of the store-in-charge. The contract workers who go down into the sewers are left to the mercy of their contractors, whom they have never even met.

3.6 Emergency and Safety

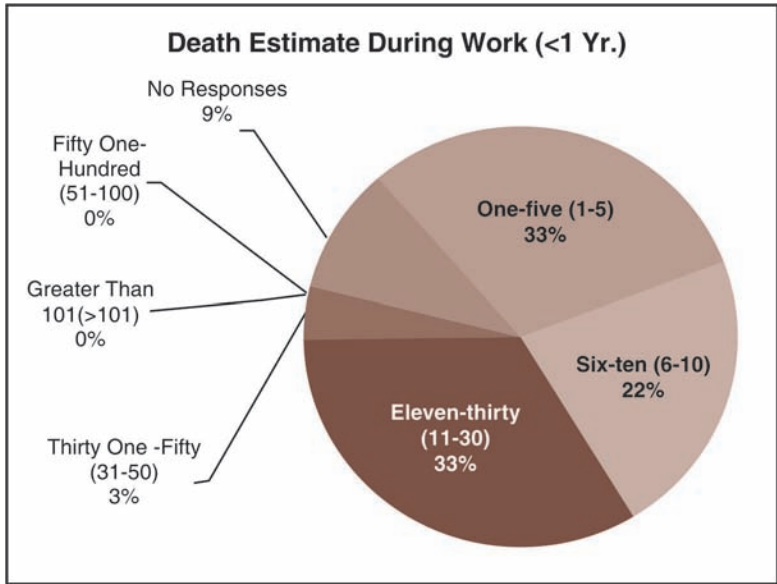
Most respondents shared experiences about not using equipment such as gas measurement metres to determine the concentration of toxic gases before entering the sewer line. Such equipment is available at very few locations and is not used for routine measurements. Almost all the respondents stated that they do not get any work permit for undertaking tasks in the sewer, which is otherwise mandatory. Only half of the respondents mentioned that they work under supervision whereas, the more trained staff mentioned that they are independent in functioning. Supervisors' presence on the site is mandatory according to the workers.

Most respondents (71%) stated that they do not have any health facilities during their job where they can report their injuries or ailments and have to handle the situation on their own.

Down the Drain!



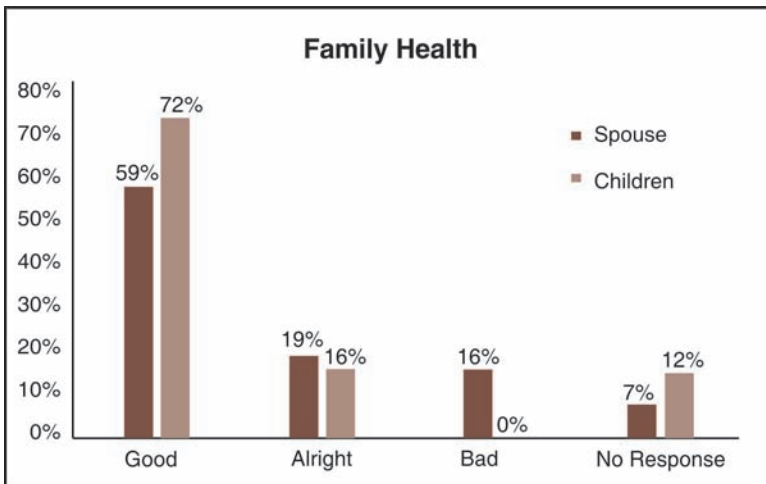
When asked about their experience in the last three years, they mentioned that there has been no initiative by the department to provide such facilities.



Sewerage workers often get seriously injured on the job and there have even been fatalities reported in the line of duty. The respondents perceived death estimates very differently. It also depended on how much information they received about the death of their colleagues. In equal proportion respondents reported the number of deaths ranging between 1 and 5, 6 and 10, and 11 and 30. There was no clear articulation of death toll and the workers did not mention the reasons for it. Some said that they are not aware about the people who worked in other locations.

3.7 Adverse Health Impact on Family

Workers' family health conditions also have a great impact on their spending. More than 70% respondents shared concerns about the well-being of their children and almost 60% talked about the well being of their spouse.



3.8 Sewerage Workers' Safety and Health: No One's Concern

The most important aspects for sewerage workers is their safety during work. Despite orders of the Honourable Courts, sewerage workers are being forced to go into sewers without the basic safety standards. Mechanisation may reduce the frequency of dangers attached to such acts but workers will still have to

go down sewers. Among these sewerage workers, condition of contract sewerage workers is worse as they have to work frequently without any authorisation.

In these hazardous conditions a sewerage worker has to go down fully or partially during machine operations. Workers need to understand all issues and facilities related to safety and accordingly, they should be trained for handling every contingency, including accidents. The sewers are full of toxic gases and harmful chemicals. Workers may suffer from hepatitis, leptospirosis and helicobacter, skin problems, respiratory system problems and altered pulmonary function parameters. The safety parameters can be divided in three subsets:

- (i) Management - execution and audits;
- (ii) Workers should be aware and equipped with safety machines and;
- (iii) There should be a prompt responsive system if any accidents occur.

Regarding management, execution and audits, the findings are discouraging. From the management's point of view, there should be comprehensive policy guidelines which should be shared with sewerage workers. Very few audits have been done in the past on safety and health issues of sewerage workers. The audits themselves are in name only as auditors mostly spent their time in the JE's office.

From the point of view of work readiness of sewerage workers, there is no system for any induction programme for new workers. The sewer workers have mostly learned safety measures from their colleagues whereas a few of them said that they learnt it on their own over time. Incidentally, DJB has started a training programme for sewerage workers in 2013. It is claimed that regular sewerage workers undergo the training in a phased manner. A few of the workers who did attend are happy about the training programme but it is hard for them to follow all the safety instructions which they learnt at the training, as they do not have access to such safety equipment like mask respirators, shoes, skin protection suits and eye protection equipment. This is very surprising because DJB claims that it has all the required safety equipment but it is not available to these workers.



Chapter 4

Contracting: Economics or oppression?

4.1 An “Unskilled” Skill

All sewerage workers agree that their profession requires a lot of skill. Rakesh (name changed) mentioned, “It is not easy for anyone to do this. Often, some Dalit construction workers are asked to clear the sewerage just because they belong to a particular caste thinking that it is their hereditary occupation. But they are unable to as they do not have the skill.” He shared details of the preparatory “techniques” before entering the sewer, including testing the atmosphere for gases and having at least two more persons to understand and interpret warning signs.” He also listed the safety equipment that a sewerage worker should generally have and added that most deaths occur because the sewerage workers are not adequately trained or because they lack safety equipment. He adds, “Globally sewer cleaning and maintenance services are seen as a highly skilled job which is carried out with the support of specialised equipment. In India though, this job has been seen fit only for people from a particular caste and class and due to this no thought has been given to provide modernisation. Learning mostly is from peers and on the job, exposing the worker to higher risks while doing the job.”

The categorisation of work as skilled or unskilled does not take into consideration any of these nuanced skills. A participant stated, “In the end, the work is reduced to cleaning of filth. Therefore, it is treated as unskilled. What is ignored is the fact that workers have to be completely submerged into that filth to clear a pipeline.”

Sewerage work has not yet been a site of modernisation in this country and any talks of it have only been on paper. The work

still involves intensive manual labour and what is unfortunate is that, in the absence of mechanisation, there is very little scope for sewerage work be classified as a “skilled job”. It is assumed that this work does not require educated and trained human resources at any level.

Almost 91% respondents reported that sewerage work is unfortunately being treated as unskilled labour. Madan (name changed) says, “The negligence and the politics around sanitation work in India is deeply rooted in considering the work as informal, as well as keeping sewerage workers outside the ambit of the Act of 1993, denying them fundamental rights of equality, life and liberty”.

Is it genuinely unskilled work?

“Because it is unskilled, the salary is low and no attention is given to working conditions.”

“There is no technical support or technical institution that provides training to sewerage workers. Education is almost irrelevant.”

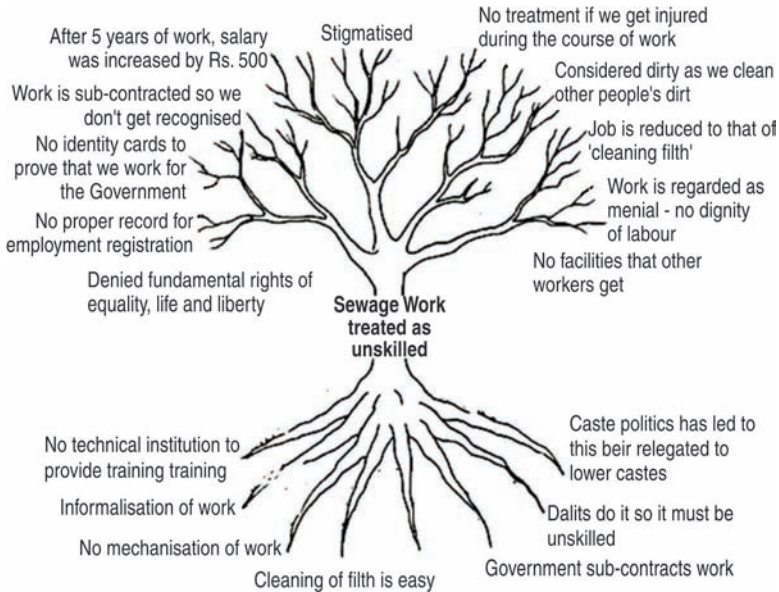
“We clean others’ dirt but people regard this work itself as dirty and treat us as untouchable”

“Stigma is attached with the work as it is the traditional reserve of the lower castes. This has made the prevalent caste-based discriminatory attitudes prevent sewerage work from being taken seriously. Biases about caste often get in the way of providing material support and benefits for the job, as it is considered lowly and menial. This same attitude leads to people involved in sewerage work feeling a sense of shame and humiliation about their work.”

“People believe that facilities would make this caste earn a better livelihood and be at par with the other castes. They are afraid that such upward mobility would make their next generation not interested in doing sewerage work. Thus, they do not give us anything.”

“We are treated worse than animals. We get no respect.”

Down the Drain!



The image above is a reproduction of the problem tree analysis done by the study participants on the reasons and consequences of sewerage work being treated as unskilled.

Policy makers have specific preconceived notions which continue to keep the task in the 'unskilled' category. This mind-set is built through a systematic caste prejudice, according to which a 'sewerage worker' and a 'sewer work' is 'dirty' and is stratified lowly in the hierarchy of occupations. Without challenging this mind-set, only symptoms are addressed. Layers of discriminations have been built upon this prejudice and these discriminations are seen as normal. Sewerage work is not even contracted to agencies, it is often contracted to an individual contractor, who himself would not be a sewerage worker, and often is not from the Balimiki caste. By retaining this task as "unskilled", the wages are minimal and the contractor often takes his own cut. The financial liability is low and the entire responsibility is often transferred to the contractor, who is interested only in maximising his own profit often undermining the safety aspects of the sewerage worker. Narayan Singh Dharma mentioned, "there should be provision of

risk allowance for the workers. Also, classifying sewerage work as technical will ensure it is not considered menial.”

4.2 Sub-Contracting: Ways and Means of Evading Responsibility

In the study sample, about 57% of interviewed workers were permanent employees of Delhi Jal Board working as sewerage cleaning workers. About 43% of respondents were working on a contractual basis. Among these contractual employees, 50% had been working for more than five years. Almost 89% of respondents continued to work for more than one year. Despite all the hardships, they continue on the job because they hope to be made permanent employees thus securing a government job, with all its benefits and facilities.

“They pay us extremely low wages”

While permanent workers receive wages ranging from Rs 12,000 - 20,000, the maximum monthly wage a contractual worker gets does not exceed Rs 8000. It is often as low as Rs 4000/- per month. “I am getting paid not more than Rs 4,500/- per month. With this, it is not possible to sustain the family and give the children a better future. Further, there is no future security for us.” Another worker adds, “I have been working for 5 years. Only last year my salary was increased by Rs 600.” The figure in the adjacent page shows the distribution of the number of years of work that the study respondents have been involved in. A bulk (64%) of the participants have been working for over ten years.

Suresh and Shyam, sewerage workers, live with financial constraints. They claim to have heard through different sources that their actual salary is Rs 8,500 but they only get Rs 4,000-4,500 depending upon how many Sundays or national holidays they have not been able to work on. They said that they receive only half of their sanctioned salaries and actually treat daily-wage workers with payments of Rs 200 per day. Their wage is secured once they report to the workstation irrespective of the volume of work done by them. They do not get any leave or holidays and even work on Sundays. In case they are not able to work on any national holiday or festival, their salary gets deducted. While the amount is based on the daily wage norm, they get their payment

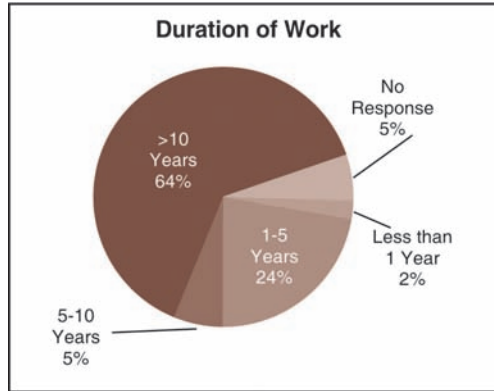
by the end of one month or sometimes after two months. But their problem does not end there - they even face unemployment for a period of one to two months every time their contractor's contract goes for renewal with DJB. On those days, it is

very difficult for them as no one gives them work because of their social status. They end up loitering around on the street in search of some work. Suresh adds, "I have no job security and I can be asked to leave the job whenever the contractor wants."

"A nurse giving an injection has been provided with risk allowance but the people who go 20 feet into sewer holes are not provided with any kind of protection"

Contract workers are completely denied of any benefits or social security, including medical facilities. A worker says, "Salary is deducted if we take a leave for injuries sustained during our work." Another worker gives an example, "Once while cleaning sewers, I got a serious infection and wanted to go home but my supervisor did not let me go until I finished the work. Later I had to treat my injuries at my own expense." For contract workers, there is no facility of panel hospitals or Central Government Health Scheme (CGHS) facilities.

Salim narrated an incident where he met with an accident when he went down into the sewer. He did not realise the extent of noxious gases in the sewer and somehow managed to come up before fainting. His friend and co-workers took him to the nearby hospital where he gradually recovered. He felt sad that nobody from DJB nor any contractor came to help him or enquired about his health. Furthermore, he was shocked when he got his salary with a deduction of the days when he was hospitalised and under treatment.



“We are not informed about safety equipment.”

Despite mandated instructions, safety equipment is often not available. “We are not given any equipment and the stores are empty. Most of the time we get our own equipment from home. The department just provides a bucket, rope and a shovel.” It is not that workers do not demand these. Salim says, “Many times we have considered demanding safety equipment and training. But we are threatened with the loss of our jobs”. They said that they often get hand gloves in the name of safety equipment. To put it in simple words, as Salim says, “my life has no value. I only believe in God and his mercy for enabling me to work without any training and safety equipment”.

Their work conditions are very difficult. “There is no proper room for rest in the stores for us. The rooms are damp and damaged. Water leaks all the time. The condition of the rooms is so bad that we sometimes do not even have space to sit. So even the thought of taking rest is far from our minds. The bathroom too has no bucket, soap, oil or even proper water supply. We mostly wash ourselves at the municipal taps on the roadside.”

“We do not have any identity. We have even not seen our contractors”

The contract workers do not have any identity card. A worker says, “People ask for our identity cards and we do not have anything to show as proof that we are employed under Jal Board. People sometimes ask us to clean their home sewerages also. There is only a rough sheet as a record and that is regarded as a registration sheet for us.” Though the workers say that they work for DJB, they do not have any evidence to prove so.

Ved Prakash says, “Government subcontracting of sewerage work to private contractors has led to more informalisation. Not being recognised directly affects their identity, compromising their basic human rights and respect as an individual as well as totally invisibilising the whole community with negligence”. The ‘informalisation of work’ and recruiting workers on a contractual basis reduces the amount of money that needs to be spent on the workers. It also ensures that they can be exploited to a greater extent with less pay and facilities.

4.3 Contracting – A Self-perpetuating Nexus Undermining Worker Interests

Perils of Sub-contracting

Salim did not know that he was picked from his home to perform a dangerous job. While he had been doing risky jobs since his childhood such as diving into rivers to pick coins it was different because he enjoyed doing it. He is now working as a sewerage worker on a contractual basis. He feels that there are several life-threatening situations in his present job. He believes that in picking coins he only needed expertise in swimming, but here as a sewerage worker, he could not predict what kind of danger he would encounter on a daily basis.

Salim joined this contractual job when he was 16 years old, and since the last four years he has been reporting daily to his workstation. He goes to open blockages when ordered by his supervisor. Everyday, he and his peers clean sewerage but they live in trauma, as no one knows what will happen in the next hour or the next minute. He said that when they go deep into the sewers, there is no one to monitor and no safeguards in case of any accident or mishap. If something happens to them then they need to spend their own money to get treatment. Non-permanent workers are not provided any medical insurance or coverage unlike permanent sewerage workers of Delhi Jal Board. He expressed his dissatisfaction at the fact that DJB outsources jobs without taking any such precautions and since this information is not being shared publicly no one bothers to question it.

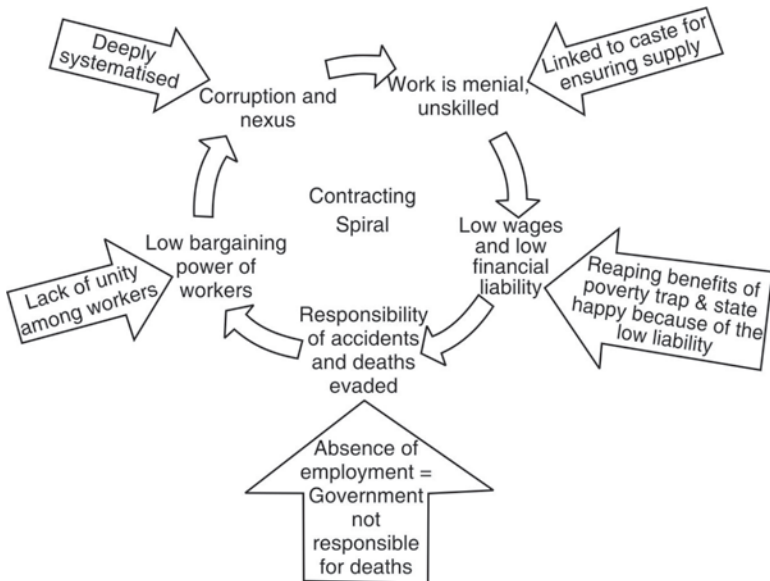
He says that he is illiterate so not only is he denied access to information but also refused answers if he questions his supervisor. He and his co-workers have never even seen their contractor. He said that no one would believe them but all contractual sewerage workers working with the DJB have never seen anybody from their company. They do not even know the name of their contracting company. They only get their salaries in cash through DJB's JE (Junior Engineer) or supervisors.

Fighting emotions, Salim said that because he was poor and illiterate, his life had no value. No one would even cry if he died in a sewer. This was a very likely scenario because every day was a tryst with danger.

It was reported that the workers who have been on the job for more than ten years have formed strong links within the union

and the management. They slowly get promoted to middlemen or facilitators for providing contractual jobs within the department. There are several other issues like wages, appointment of contractual workforce and working conditions over which officials do not want to disturb the workers who are established as it could escalate a management-union confrontation. In this system, the old-time workers become negotiators as well as a management tool to address distress within the work force.

Individuals like Ved Prakash, Union member, Delhi Jal Board, as well as Narayan Singh Dharma voice the issues strongly but are struggling hard to bring a change in workers' lives. Ved Prakash says, "Sewerage work is just like cleaning your own personal toilet. Only when people think in that way will the stigma and discrimination associated with it will get removed. Society will progress and people will get their individual rights and then there will be equality." The study respondents concluded that the vicious cycle or spiral linked to contracting is as depicted in the figure below:



Hope of Safe and Healthy Lives

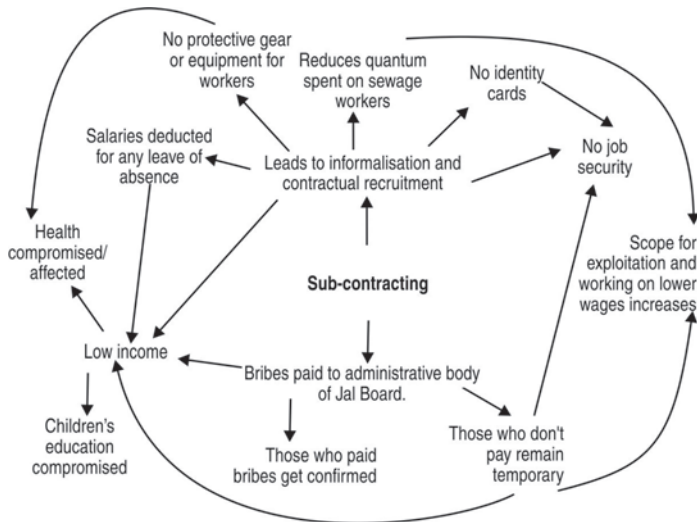
Suresh & Shyam belong to the Balmiki community because of which they do not get jobs anywhere else. Shyam is 45 years old and Suresh is 37 years old and both are contractual sewerage workers with Delhi Jal Board for the last four years. Though they said that they work for DJB, they have no evidence to prove their employment status.

Suresh said that they hope that one day they will also get respect in society and they would start a new, safe and healthy life. Initially, it was not clear that Suresh was stressing on the importance of 'safe and healthy' because of a personal experience. He gradually shared details about how he was losing his eyesight due to his work. The sewers are full of dangerous gases, which have harmed his eyesight. He also shared this with his supervisor but nothing came out of it. He didn't get any treatment or precautions to save his eyes.

He was even informed that the contractor was not responsible if anything happened to him. He was told that his pay was given for cleaning the sewer effectively, and in case he was not able to do so, someone else would replace him. Despite these hardships, they still have a hope that one day they will get regular employment and their children will go to regular school like other children.

The study participants also worked out a detailed causal loop analysis linked to the issue of sub-contracting. The image below gives a snapshot of some of the key discussions:

Down the Drain!



Using this as a starting point the study participants came up with the following list of demands:

- Sewerage work should be seen like cleaning one's own personal toilet. Only when people think in this way, will the stigma and discrimination associated with it get reduced
- If sewerage work is made technical it will be considered less menial
- Remove contract workers and make us permanent workers
- Provide us with facilities, security, training as well as medical check-ups which a worker is entitled to
- Provide us with better facilities at work like proper stores having all the equipment like gloves, uniforms, helmets, ropes, masks, buckets, boots, etc.
- We need identity cards and proper registration
- There should be proper institutions for the training of sewerage workers
- Caste-based discrimination should be abolished. On provision of facilities and making the work permanent, discrimination will get reduced



Chapter 5

Voice for Change: Socio-Political Economy of Bargaining

Even after 65 years of independence, freedom eludes a large section of Indians. It is still a challenge for marginalised communities to negotiate their rights vis-à-vis the larger society for daily survival, let alone making a concrete set of demands, which are often their rightful entitlements from the government. One can see that contractual sewerage workers have constantly been “bargaining” in their lives, and it is “their dignity that they bargain with” for a daily wage for survival. Their voice is often one of the “twice-subaltern”, wherein they are exploited even by those exploited.

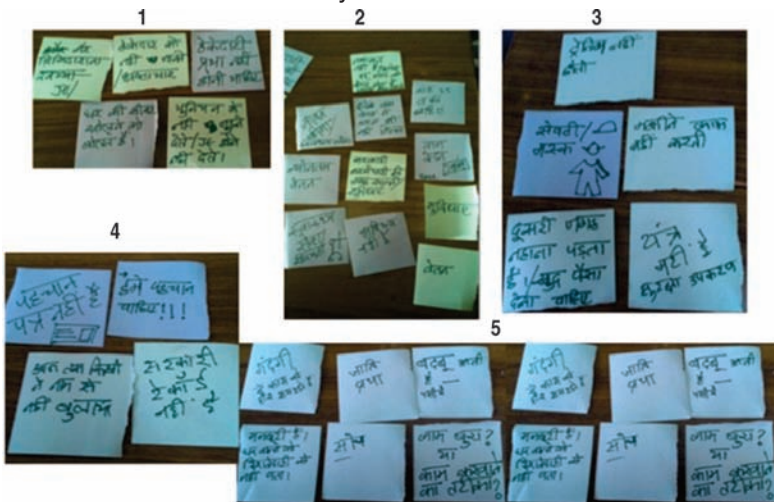
The participants identified five critical problems they are facing and they ranked them using a card-sorting tool. These are presented below:

1. **‘Third degree’ exploitation:** Government sub-contracting to private contractors has led to more informalisation of work. There is now primacy to temporary work as it has reduced the amount of money to be spent on workers. The contractors exploit them to a great extent by paying less, and often giving them no remuneration for certain tasks. It is a kind of feudal system, where the contractor pays just half the salary that is allocated to the workers. Unlike the earlier feudal system, here the workers recruited have no knowledge of who their contractors are. They have no contact with them as they hardly ever come to meet the workers. 72 contract workers have died due to the adverse working conditions in the last few years.
2. **Insecure livelihood:** Even if contracting is accepted, the

nature of contracting is very peculiar. Sewerage workers are not technically “contract” workers as there are no written documents mentioning the terms and conditions of the contract. They have no job security, and they can be asked to leave the job whenever the contractor wants. There are oral norms, which include a salary commitment (around Rs 4500) deductible if they take even a day’s leave owing to work-related injuries. There is literally no bargaining. They do not feel secure with a job even for a month without any proper documents. Owing to absence of any other livelihood options and because of the dream of acquiring a permanent government job in future, these workers bargain their dignity for a low salary.

3. **Absence of safety measures:** Despite knowing they are exploited and with the knowledge that the work is difficult, these workers have to go into the infectious sewerage hole that has germs carrying diseases without any protection. They do not have access to any safety equipment other than a safety belt, bucket, rope and shovel. There is no training for them. Norms are flouted. Their work-related injuries are ignored and they do not get leave for regular medical check-ups. They mention, “Nurses giving an injection are provided with so much of protection but these persons going 20 feet deep down in sewerage holes are not provided with any kind of protection”. The workers have to bear their own medical expenses for the injuries inflicted while working even if they had filled the forms for medical insurance.
4. **Absence of identity cards:** There is a sheet which is kept to record their work and that is regarded as a registration sheet. The workers do not have any identity card. This means they cannot access any entitlement or medical facility. This directly affects their identity as an individual, leading to invisibilisation of the whole community with negligence. It means they cannot form associations or join any workers union. They are excluded even from the politics of bargaining between workers and the management.

5. **Discrimination in society:** The community is not respected in society owing to multiple prejudices. "We are not even offered water while at work". "We are not called by our names". "The work which we do is seen as dirty." "The work is portrayed as work that a lower caste should do." Caste is a major factor for discrimination and stigma attached to it. "Independent of the caste also, people do not treat us well because of the work we do". "We often do not even tell our family members about our work."



Sewerage workers identified stakeholders that they negotiate their rights with. Owing to Supreme Court judgments and information on regular deaths of sewerage workers, there is a level of awareness among workers. They do not know their rights and entitlements fully, but they are aware that there have been some professional safety steps that have become mandatory. They meet a number of people on a daily basis to claim their rights. However, their bargaining power is restricted because of their social and economic status. Absence of a strong workers' union that can stand up for their demands denies them a political standing.

Down the Drain!

<i>Stakeholder</i>	<i>Sub-stakeholder</i>	<i>What they engage on?</i>	<i>Challenges they face?</i>	<i>Coping strategy?</i>
Society	Employers	Job/ work	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Their caste, education status deprives them of access. + There is no secure livelihood. + Once everyone knows their identity they are disallowed 	We take whatever we get; but we also become choosy. We do not take such job where we are insulted openly.
	Education and Health spaces	Treatment or education for child	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Doctors do not touch them + Medicines are prescribed without physical examinations 	We have to hide our status.
Government	Contractor	Salary	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + They cannot meet the contractor + Paid salary by cash by a DJB supervisor 	We continue with the hope that sometime we will become permanent.
	DJB	Work, facilities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Often it goes to either deaf or helpless ears. + Some sympathise but they cannot do much. 	We work. We do not protest, because if we do, we wont get work the next day
Workers' Union	Major Unions of permanent workers	Benefits and entitlements	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + They have their own issues. + Many of them struggle to get their allowances and benefits 	We cannot do much.
	Unions that include contract workers	Permanent job	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> + Some of them have taken up the issue of contractual workers and are struggling 	With time, we are getting united. Getting contract workers together is impossible, for they are invisible.

The contractual sewerage workers came up with a set of demands. The image below details these demands that they have made from the government, society and both entities together. These have been elaborated below on the basis of immediacy:

Down the Drain!



Long-Term Demands (one year)

- Abolish sub-contracting
- DJB must maintain a permanent cadre of sewerage workers by issuing identity cards. Only agencies experienced in doing this work should be used. Sewerage workers have to be trained on a periodic basis with latest techniques and practices.
- Mechanisation is important and necessary but not at the cost of job loss as workers would lose their only source of income. The workers in regular or contract employment must not be terminated; rather they must all be given regular employment.

Short-Term Demands (1-3 Months)

- Sewerage work is technical and not be treated as 'unskilled'. It should be provided a 'skilled job' status for the purpose of wage calculation.
- Workers should have access to safety equipment, without which they should not be allowed to enter sewer lines. They have to be adequately and periodically trained to use safety equipment.

Down the Drain!

- Social Audits & Social Equity Audits of stores and the contractors should be conducted to present a clearer picture of gaps and challenges, including areas of corruption

Immediate Demands (Less than One Month)

- Publicise the names of contractors; make all terms of each of the contracts available for public use. Monthly detailed expenses against the contracts to be made available on a quarterly basis and displayed in each of the stores
- Provide full body suits to all sewerage workers, including contractual workers
- Provide identity cards to all sewage workers, including contractual workers
- Provide identity cards to all contractual workers and make them aware of their entitlements vis-à-vis contractors.

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Down The Drain is based on a study on occupational and health hazards faced by sewerage workers in Delhi, especially those who work as contract labourers. The study looks at caste dynamics, health impacts and the lack of accountability to the sewerage workers and culminates in their demands for a life of dignity.

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