

Making Waste-removal Caste-neutral

What is the issue?

\n\n

\n

- With Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA), there is also a need for making the waste-removal profession caste-neutral.

\n

\n\n

A clean village exists because an ‘unclean’ caste is forced to absorb the ‘filth’ of the village.

\n\n

What is SBA?

\n\n

\n

- Swachh Bharat Abhiyan (SBA) was a nationwide initiative to clean public spaces.
- It aimed at inspiring the public to voluntarily clean public spaces as a service to the nation.
- The government is resolved to accomplish the vision of a clean India by 2019.
- The campaign initially highlighted images of celebrities “voluntarily” sweeping the streets.
- Concurrently, municipalities began to employ more contractual labourers.

\n

\n\n

What are the concerns?

\n\n

\n

- **Deaths** - The campaign hardly addresses a reworking of the underground

sewerage system.

\n

- Many labourers have died recently while cleaning jammed manholes that open into the sewerage system.

\n

- The disturbing fact is that these deaths have a caste pattern.

\n

- In 2017, over 300 cases of such deaths were reported mostly from particular caste groups.

\n

- **Role** - The campaign burdens the contractual labourer with an 'exclusive' right to cleaning public spaces.

\n

- But it makes it a voluntary act for the 'public' to not defecate, urinate or litter in random spaces.

\n

- There is a lack of punitive measures to urge public to follow healthy practices.

\n

- **Attitude** - In India, waste carries the stigma that is attached to pollution and caste.

\n

- It is thus carried on to the process of removal ('scavenging') and the occupation ('scavenger').

\n

- The waste remover in India is not a professional, like in the West.

\n

- **Collection** - In the past, municipalities erected bins in common places for the shops and households to dispose of waste.

\n

- Under SBA, these bins were the first to be removed, as it offered door-to-door collection.

\n

- Members from the households now bring unsegregated garbage which is collected by the workers.

\n

- The workers collect them and it is then sent to the composting yard where workers segregate the waste.

\n

- Manually segregating the waste at the landfill compromises their hygiene and health.

\n

- **Caste** - The door-to-door service has several darker undertones.

\n

- Until they were banned in 1993, dry latrines were emptied through a similar door-to-door service.
\n
- The workers blow whistle to indicate their arrival to the households.
\n
- Not only this, it also announced the presence of a lower caste person.
\n
- This was in order to warn caste Hindus from crossing their paths.
\n
- In the colonial past and even now in some places, toilet locations are planned with caste notions.
\n

\n\n

What is the Western approach?

\n\n

- **Approach** - The Western model aims at removing waste from the public gaze.
\n
- Stopping the spread of disease was the primary intention in the West.
\n
- However, sanitation is now largely an extension of visual aesthetics as well.
\n
- Sanitation now means more the absence of “filthiness all around us”.
\n
- The West introduced technologies to systematically remove waste.
\n
- **London** - The Londoners experienced the ‘Great Stink’ in 1858.
\n
- The government then realised the need for a holistic sewerage plan that become part of the water infrastructure.
\n
- It aimed at removing filth and treating waste from the river Thames in a sustainable way.
\n
- Soon, the construction of toilets in households and shops became mandatory.
\n

\n\n

What should India do?

\n\n

\n

- Similarities between secular SBA and casteist form of manual scavenging are evident, but unnoticed.

\n

- While cleaning is a voluntary 'service' for caste Hindus, collecting and disposing waste remains a 'duty' for particular castes.

\n

- Thus the stigma attached to sanitary labour, place and waste should be critically addressed.

\n

- Any tangible achievement of a clean India is possible only by caste-neutralising these professions.

\n

- Adoption of advanced technologies in waste management, collection and disposal can go a long way.

\n

\n\n

\n\n

Source: The Hindu

\n

