

Death of two more dalits – The tragic fate of UGD workers in KR Nagar¹

Report dated 12.04.2008²

“The underground sewers of Chennai have become death traps for workers and little seems to have been done to prevent the loss of innocent lives. Last week, 30-year-old Ramesh choked to death when he stepped into a Metrowater sewer at Pulianthope. On Wednesday, Shanmugham (47) met with a similar fate at Purasawalkam...

Of late, such accidents are not uncommon. In August last year, three men died when they inhaled a poisonous gas after stepping into a Metrowater pumping station at Tiruvanmiyur... And at Alandur, in October, two workers died when they inhaled poisonous fumes.”

“Underground Sewers or Death Traps? The Hindu, March 2004

There are various estimates of the number of sewage workers who die in manholes every year across India. These range from atleast 1000 workers per year as per Kamdar Swasythya Suraksha Mandal, an NGO in Ahmedabad to about 22,327 dalits per year according to S. Anand. This may seem incredulous to some but is backed by data. According to information procured under RTI for the years 1996 to 2006, the Safai Kamgar Vikas Sangh has found that, in Mumbai alone, atleast 25 deaths occur every month. The chairperson of the National Commission of Safai Karamcharis, Shri Santhosh Choudhary, has gone on record to say that atleast 2-3 workers must be dying everyday inside manholes across India.

Death traps indeed.

On 09.04.2008 two more dalit workers were added to this list. On this fateful day two sewage workers (known as Powrakarmikas or UGD workers locally), Kariya (38 years) and Lakshmana (40) died of asphyxiation after inhaling poisonous gases including carbon monoxide and methane when they entered a manhole to clean it in K.R. Nagar in Mysore district. Four others Palani, S.Palani, Bhandari and Venkatesh were injured while trying to rescue Kariya and Lakshmana. This is not just a case of “bad luck” as some of the officials and police authorities are putting it at. This is a case of criminal negligence and moreover, continuing neglect and apathy on the part of the governments and bureaucrats.

¹ On 11th April and 12th April 2008, Shri Raghu, Editor of Mahisha Express (Mysore publication), Shri Maara, Underground Drainage Contract Workers Union (Mysore), Shri Krishna, Bengalooru Mahanagara Palike Guttige Powrakarmika Sangha and Clifton D’Rozario, Alternative Law Forum, Bangalore visited and spoke the four injured persons in K.R.Hospital, Asst Commissioner, Mysore district, Police Sub-Inspector KR Nagar, doctors at the Government Hospital in KR Nagar, Shri Kantaraju, President of KR Nagar TMC, families of the deceased and other powrakarmikas in KR Nagar. The present report is a product of this fact-finding visit.

² This article draws from the various articles that appeared in the Special Issue of Tehelka on the issue of manual scavenging and dalits

In K.R. Nagar there are about 50 powrakarmikas employed predominantly on daily wage basis though some are permanent. Like everywhere else, they all belong to the dalit community and live in the Aadishakti Badawane towards the outskirts of K.R.Nagar. Some of these powrakarmikas have been carrying out this work for the past 10-20 years. As one of the powrakarmikas said, "They prefer that we only enter the town to clean their streets and toilets, otherwise we must remain outside!" It does not take a genius to figure out why there is 100% reservation for dalits in the work of sweeping, cleaning garbage and underground drainage work. The division of labour based on the caste system has ensured that dalits will always be employed in such kinds of work. As Ambedkar said, in India a man is not a scavenger because of his work, but because of his birth.

According to S. Palani, one of those injured on that fateful day, the health inspector took their attendance at 1.30 p.m. as is the routine. At that time, one Raju Shrikant, whose wife is a councilor, came and demanded that some workers immediately come with him to clear a clogged underground drain. The Health Inspector then divided the powrakarmikas into groups and sent Lakhmana and Kariya to clean the clogged drains reported by Raju Shrikant. On reaching the manhole, Kariya and Lakshmana told Shrikant that they will wait for the vehicle to come since the ladder, ropes and all other equipment is in the vehicle. According to Shri Guruprasad, Police Sub-Inspector this manhole is about 20 feet deep. However, Shrikant apparently abused them and told them they would have go down the manhole and begin work immediately. Thus, despite the pleas of Kariya and Lakshmana, Shrikant forced them to open the manhole and climb down without any ladder or ropes. According to Maara, Underground Drainage Contract Workers Union (Mysore) one should climb down into a manhole only after removing its cover and letting it air out for atleast 2-3 hours to allow all the poisonous gases to escape. Thus without any ladder or rope and without allowing the manhole to air out for the required time, Kariya was forced to enter the manhole. Within two minutes of entering the manhole, he collapsed. Lakshmana who saw this also entered the manhole to rescue Kariya, but even he collapsed once he reached the bottom of the manhole.

In the meanwhile a crowd gathered and the health inspector and other powrakarmikas were contacted. Palani, S.Palani, Bhandari and Venkatesh all rushed to the manhole. The time was around 2.15 p.m. by now. One after the other the above four powrakarmikas climbed down the manhole and valiantly tried to save Kariya and Lakshmana, but in vain. Despite having a ladder and rope, these four could not rescue Kariya and Lakshmana. Bhandari says that the moment he went down the manhole he smelt a strong pungent smell and could not even stand. Immediately his eyes started watering and he started becoming dizzy and almost fainted before he was pulled up. S. Palani also tried to tie Kariya and Lakshmana to a rope so that they could be pulled up but could not. In fact the gas smell was so overwhelming and toxic, that even he fainted and fell down in the manhole alongside Kariya and Lakshmana. It was at this pointed that all realized that the fire engine service was immediately required. Before the fire fighters could reach, the crowd that had gathered had the presence of mind to lower opened oxygen cylinders into the manhole. A number of people believe that S.Palani was saved due to this. Finally the fire fighters came and rescued S. Palani and removed the bodies of Kariya and Lakshmana from the manhole. Those injured were immediately taken to K.R. Hospital in

Mysore except for Venkatesh who was taken to Government Hospital in K.R. Nagar and then transferred to K.R. Hospital the next day.

News of this incident spread like wildfire in K.R.Nagar and thousands of people gathered at the TMC office in protest. The dalit community demanded immediate action and refused to hand over the dead bodies for post mortem. Late in the night the TMC took the decision to give compensation to the families of the dead victims and the injured powrakarmikas as well, with the District Commissioner, Shri Manivannan, signaling his approval for the same. The President of the TMC, Shri Kantaraju, who is also a dalit, took the initiative to ensure that just compensation was given to the families of the victims. The resolution passed by the TMC states that the families of victims would be given compensation of Rs. 3 lakhs each and Rs. 10,000 for funeral expenses, house under Ashraya Scheme, Rs. 2000/- to those injured and jobs in the same line for one person from each of the victim's family.

The post mortem was carried out on 10.04.2008. According to Dr. Madhav D. who conducted the post mortem, both the victims were brought dead to the hospital at about 3.30 p.m. His preliminary opinion is that the cause of death is asphyxiation caused by inhaling poisonous gases including carbon monoxide, hydrogen sulphide and methane. Dr. Madhav also stated that the required specimens of organs from the victims had been removed and were to be sent to the Forensic Laboratory in Mysore and that their report would be received in one month's time.

At the time of writing this article, the four injured powrakarmikas are still receiving treatment in K.R. Hospital and according to their doctor Dr. Mohammed Ghouse Shariff, they are out of danger now. He stated that they had been brought to the Hospital in serious condition with their respiratory tract blocked due to inhaling of poisonous gases including carbon monoxide.

Shri Guruprasad V.M., Sub-inspector of Police, K.R. Nagar Police Station stated that a case (No. 69 of 2008) under sections 304-A and 337 of IPC has been registered against Raju Shrikant, two mestries (Ramesh and Krishna) and the health inspector (Ramesh). However, he added, none of them have been arrested till now.

So is this all that there is to this incident? The local newspapers that reported this incident have since moved on to cover 'important' election and other news. The elected representatives in K.R. Nagar are pleased with their efforts in ensuring just compensation. The police is busy dealing with election rallies and has no time (or intention?) to arrest the accused in this incident. The remaining powrakarmikas are working in K.R. Nagar as usual while the injured workers will rejoin them once they are discharged from the hospital. Life, as we are made to understand, goes on. However, there are several aspects of this incident that required closer scrutiny and immediate action. This, ofcourse, has not occurred to any of the concerned elected representatives, bureaucrats or even the media.

It is interesting to note that, unlike in the bigger cities like Bengalooru and Mysore where

there are separate powrakarmikas for sweeping streets/collecting garbage and for sewerage work, in almost all small towns, the same set of powrakarmikas carry out both tasks. Thus while in the cities the job of getting down manholes, removing clogs in the sewerage system, etc. are carried out by a separate group of powrakarmikas who are also paid better, in K.R. Nagar the powrakarmikas are expected to sweep the streets, collect the garbage and clean the manholes as well. Maara of Underground Drainage Contract Workers Union (Mysore) is surprised. Being a underground drainage worker himself he is of the opinion that UGD workers need to have a separate skill to do this work through training and guidance; one that is completely different from what is required by sweepers.

One of the most interesting facts in the management of UGD in K.R.Nagar is that it is on contractual basis with “someone” getting a contract to do this work and, on paper, it is this person that pays the workers. Shri Kantaraju, President of the TMC, himself stated that this contract is just a paper exercise and the workers are directly paid by the TMC. None of the Powrakarmikas know about this arrangement. Obviously this is a sham contract and illegal. Given the ambiguity about the arrangement, the provisions of the Contract Labour Act, which provides atleast some rights to the contract workers, has been cast aside with complete impunity.

The nature of employment of the dalit powrakarmikas is one of serious concern. In our conversations with the powrakarmikas, they complained that they had to be at the beck and call of the councilors. In fact the councilors order the powrakarmikas to do odd works in their houses, in their fields and run errands as well. The feudal attitude of the councilors is of grave concern. Just two days after the ghastly death of Kariya and Lakshmana, few of the powrakarmikas were again verbally abused and threatened by a ward councilor. According to the powrakarmikas, while they were waiting for the health inspector to give them work, the area Councillor, abused them and ordered them to do some work saying that *“you’re not employed for free... get to work”*. When the powrakarmikas replied saying that only the health inspector has the right to tell them what work to do the Councilor replied saying that, *“I am the Councilor and you will do what I say!”* When we went to meet the TMC President Shri Kantaraju, the same Councilor came to meet the President and complained that the powrakarmikas are not listening to him. He said, *“I am the area councilor and they will have to listen to me. That fellow had the audacity to back-answer me, so I sent him away and told him he will lose his job. I was so angry at his insolence that I then went to his house and warned him. Now he has come around and begged me for forgiveness so I agreed to let him work again.”* This is unacceptable. The powrakarmikas are employed by the local corporations and are under the health inspector and mestries who guide them in their work and duties. Under the law they are not employed by the councilor and the councilor do not have the right to make them do any work, either on the streets or in their houses or fields!

It is this feudal attitude of the councilors that has resulted in the death of Kariya and Lakshmana. The ex-Councilor Raju Shrikant (whose wife is the present Councilor) ordered Kariya and Lakshmana into the manhole even though they had no ladder or ropes. This is the reason for the case to be registered against him.

Conclusions:

The deaths of dalits in manholes occasionally occupy news headlines. The daily story of dalits climbing down manholes without any protective gear and emerging with bucketful of shit and other dirt does not. The inhuman and unhygienic nature of the work epitomed in the image of the dalit emerging from the manhole covered with shit does not make anyone cringe. All it does is make people cover their noses and run for cover!

The Center for Education and Communication, another NGO based in Delhi, is carrying out a study among sewerage workers in Delhi. Some of its key findings are:

- Few workers in age groups 50-59, most die before retirement
- 35 percent illiteracy
- Monthly wage of Rs 2,950/- (for daily wage workers)
- More than 40 percent of workers are not permanent though more than 90 percent of them have been working for more than five years continuously
- 60 percent of workers enter manholes more than 10 times a month
- Acute illnesses: eye irritation (79%), upper respiratory tract irritation (57%), difficulty breathing (38%), skin rash (60.5%), cuts and injury (91.5%)
- Chronic Illnesses: fatigue (76%), burning of eyes (36%) cough (72.5%), skin irritation (41%), lower backache (27%)
- Little awareness about hazards at work; no initiative from authority to generate awareness; lack of supervision

What is also shocking is the manner in which the inhuman and unhygienic nature of the work is so conveniently ignored by those 18.02% of India's population whose shit, piss and other waste is sent down the pipes into the sewers for the dalits to maintain. It is probably epitomed by the supposedly 'funny' advertisement on T.V. of the FM Radio channel Radio Mirchi in which a man is shown singing from inside a manhole, apparently since "Mirchi Sunnewaale Always Khush".

The network of sewers, underground drains and manholes, the workplace of these workers, are extremely dangerous. These are confined, oxygen-deficient spaces where the decomposition and fermentation of sewage produces noxious gases including hydrogen sulphide (known as sewer gas), methane, carbon monoxide, etc., all of which cause death by asphyxiation. The long-term neurological effects of exposure to these noxious gases are also very severe and debilitating.

According to Maara, UGD Contract Workers Union (Mysore), since they do not have any protective wear or gas detecting devices, most manhole workers have developed ingenious methods of checking the concentration of these toxic gases. After opening the manhole cover, they let it vent a while, then light a match and throw it in. If there's methane, it burns out. Once the fire abates, the worker prepares to enter. Maara opines that this has to be done before entering any manhole.

In most developed nations, manhole workers are protected in bunny suits to avoid contact with contaminated water and sport a respiratory apparatus; the sewers are well-lit, mechanically aerated with huge fans and therefore are not so oxygen deficient. In Hong

Kong, a sewer worker, after adequate training, needs at least 15 licences and permits to enter a manhole. **In India the only qualification required is being Dalit.** The entry-level salary of a sanitation worker in New York is \$30,000 per year. In the sixth year, he could earn \$67,141 (Rs 2.18 lakh per month). In K.R.Nagar, as is the case elsewhere in India, Kariya, Lakshmana and all other workers, with about 15-20 years experience, were earning about Rs 3,000/- per month.

The powrakarmikas to whom we spoke said that the lack of an alternative employment and opportunities is the prime reason for them taking up this job. In fact this is the refrain from most powrakarmikas across the country. Bezwada Wilson argues that it is not concerns about livelihood that cause these doubts but the caste mindset and caste values, built on the base of social exclusion and economic exploitation. I believe that this is true, but only partly since it does not take into account socio-economic realities of this community, their educational qualifications and opportunities in regard to other livelihoods. It also discounts the impacts of accelerated economic liberalisation, globalisation and privatisation on society at large and dalits in particular and how this shapes the conditions of the community. Due to their reasons, the government must ensure that each and every sewage worker is provided with alternative employment on permanent basis in the local corporations itself.

Though the practice of manual scavenging is banned in India, this urban avatar of manual scavenging; handling urine and faeces with their bare hands, wading through rotting sewage in clogged underground drains and manholes, can be seen in every single town and city across the country. Yet nothing is being done about it. While one can talk of providing protective gear, minimum wage, social security, etc. the question of whether humans should be doing this work at all also needs to be raised. The government must ban the usage of humans for this work and completely mechanise it. Interestingly the Gujarat High Court ordered in February 2006, in a special civil application filed by Ahmedabad based NGO Kamdar Swasthya Suraksha Mandal, that ***“unless it is absolutely necessary to have sewage cleaning operation done through a human agency, none of the civic bodies in the state will now employ human agency to carry out drainage cleaning operation.”***

This is the way ahead. The only way to prevent any more deaths and the continuation of this form of inhuman work is by the powrakarmikas finding other employment, through their own initiatives and efforts of the government, and the government banning this work by humans