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Sanitising India or Cementing Injustice? Scrutinising the Swachh Bharat Mission in India

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Abstract

Occupational competence and division of labour in India have historically been linked to social institutions of caste, class and gender. Labour related to sanitation and waste disposal has perpetually been assigned to the most backward caste groups. The reality of the caste system and the revulsion of upper caste groups from any physical contact with dirt and human waste, or with people dealing with waste and sewage, has had many implications for the state of sanitation and cleanliness in India. The national policy on sanitation and its flagship program the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), seems to ignore this caste reality and the conditions of people involved in waste and sanitation-related activities. SBM focuses on infrastructure building for ownership and access of toilets and not on dealing with sludge and sewage, conditions of sanitary workers and their rehabilitation. The technology used in the toilets being constructed, their sustainability, safety and retrofitting needs also requires critical assessment. Any policy for a sanitised India or Swachh Bharat will only be successful if it considers the notion of caste, of ritual pollution associated with human waste and dirt in India and removes the shackles of caste that have chained few marginal communities to such occupations, thereby making the enterprise of sanitation and cleaning in India truly egalitarian and democratic, in the sense of opportunities and participation.

Keywords

Caste, occupation, sanitation, waste and sewage, Swachh Bharat Mission, scavengers

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Labour, Sanitation and Waste in India

All of us, especially those born in small towns and cities of India, might have witnessed a sight wherein a group of people, working in tandem, take out dark, dense and putrid sludge from a manhole, a chamber or uncovered drains, to clear up the sewer line and allow the septage to flow through. I witnessed this same act on the twenty-first of May last year (2022), in the resettlement colonies of Karawl Nagar in North East Delhi. Half a dozen, half-naked men, with bare torsos, were trying to unclog a drain connected to a chamber, with the help of long and sleek bamboo sticks. One of them entered the chamber connected to the drain, with another watching over him, to ascertain where and how much sludge is stuck in the drain line connected to the chamber. Soon enough he took out a mass of thick black sludge, congealed together with plastics and refuse, with his bare hands, asking his compatriot to pass him a shovel, to clear all that is still stuck in the drain.

The sight of a fellow human trying to grasp semi-solid faecal sludge with his uncovered hands would have been nauseating for most of us, leaving behind a sombre experience. There may be several inquisitions which surround us, in the wake of such an experience, like, why do these people agree to do such work? Why didn't they have any instruments or modern equipment for doing this? Why do they still have to enter a manhole? And maybe, who are these people? This article is an attempt to engage with some of these catechisms, in particular, and India's waste and sanitation landscape in general.

The destiny of labouring classes in India has historically been linked to social institutions of caste, gender and ethnicity (Harriss-White & Gooptu 2001, Thorat & Newman, 2010). In mediaeval times, proscriptions over occupational choices were enforced by the ideals of the *Varnashrama dharma*, elaborated in the *Rigveda*'s dharma shastras. The Varna system divided society into four varnas and a group of outcastes. The four varnas are Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras, for those who cannot be assigned any of the four varnas, allegedly for their grievous sins of a past life, become the outcastes, the untouchables, or the Dalits. The varnas, as suggested, also dictated the type of labour and occupational engagement of each of the five social classes, where all labour relating to waste, sanitation and such activities which were considered ritually polluting, like dealing with carcass of dead cattle, cremation and burial rites, etc., were enforced on the lowest sub-castes (*Jati*) among the outcaste Dalits. In the *Narada samhita*, we find that of the fifteen duties of slaves, one was the disposal of human excreta. Similarly, in *Vajasaneyi samhita* from the *Yajurveda*, chandalas were termed as slaves, engaged in the disposal of human waste. However, excavations at Harappan civilisation (3000–1500 BCE) sites Lothal and Dholavira[1] in Gujarat have shown that people had waterborne toilets in each house, which were

[1]The site of Dholavira is not mentioned in the source text, although, it has been added because recent exploration has found that it too had similarly developed sanitary systems as Lothal, during the Harappan Civilisation. For more information on this see; UNESCO. (2021) Dholavira: A Harappan City. UNESCO World Heritage Centre. https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1645/

linked by drains covered by burnt clay bricks, much before the Vedic texts were written. The drainage system was very developed and had manholes and chambers to facilitate operations and maintenance. As the Indus Valley civilisation declined, the science of sanitary engineering also suffered a setback (Ramaswamy, 2005).

The consolidation of caste-varna consciousness accelerated during British rule. As Aloysius explains (1999) that caste was not omnipresent as a social formation and was only peculiar to certain areas in early India, the river valleys in particular. It was only through what he terms 'collusive colonialism' that a compact between religion and nation emerged, leading to the re-historicisation and legitimation of a caste-varna system or the Brahminical social order. This collusion between the dominant castes and the foreign elites leads to the rise of state power among the dominant castes and establishes the essentialist and quasi-sacred nature of caste across India. In the words of Srinivas, as quoted by Aloysius (1999, p. 163), 'The establishment of Pax Britannica has set the caste free from the territorial limitation inherent in the pre-British political system'. The essentialization of caste, during imperialism, was aided by the dominant castes who tried to compensate for the setbacks to sanitary sciences while also ensuring the ritual avoidance of dirt and filth (especially human excreta) as stated in their Vedic texts. It meant that the practice of manual scavenging, i.e. handling human excrements with bare hands gained enormously and became widespread during the British rule, as they legitimised and systematised it, while urbanising, setting up army cantonments and municipalities (Prashad, 2000; Ramaswamy, 2005). Hence, occupational choices, especially in regions where caste consciousness was strong and hegemonic, got governed by an intricate system, which dictated who was adroit for a particular occupation, based on the position of the caste/sub-caste, in which he was born, within the hierarchical scheme of the caste system. If born outside the four varnas, as an outcaste, one had to profess such a job which was considered ritually polluting.

As Prashad notes (2000, p. 30), 'The colonial officials did not invent caste nor did they invent the relations between the landlords and the wage workers, but they certainly intervened in clear and specific ways to set certain customs above others as the legal norm.' Among such interventions was their setting up of municipal corporations and creation of a system of sanitation for their urban centres, this system was built upon the labour of landless farm labouring Dalits, who were forced to migrate from rural centres to urban areas, mainly because of the British agrarian policy and taxation policy, which privileged the landholding peasant castes and its needs, as they were important for their trade and production (Prashad, 2000; Ramaswamy, 2005). In the endeavour to ensure sanitary living conditions in urbanising centres for the army and administrative personnel, the imperialists were aided greatly by the nationalists, agitating for freedom. The nationalists were largely convinced by the language of modernity, with the need for civic consciousness and public health. As Chakrabarty (1992, p. 544) puts it, 'they both seek to make the bazaar, the street, the mela-the arenas for collective action in pre-British India - benign, regulated places, clean and healthy, incapable of producing either disease or disorder.' Nonetheless, the nationalists' concern for

public health and sanitation did not translate into a concern for those who were being burdened with cleaning and sanitary activities, namely the lowest sub-castes among Dalits. Even Gandhi, who symbolised the moralistic leadership of the struggle against imperialism, did not directly challenge the notion of ritual pollution associated with sanitation, contrarily he vouched for the appropriateness of *Varnasaharma*, as the foundational ethos of Hindu society, which gained currency among the mainstream political discourse of the Nationalist movement. 'Rather than remove the prejudice against sanitation and urge others to join the sanitary corps, the Gandhian solution, for the most part, entailed a valorisation of Dalits as sweepers, not now to be seen as the lowest occupation, but indeed as the highest' (Prashad, 2000, pp. 112–113). Having lost their traditional occupations, and struggling to survive in urban centres, the landless Dalits were coerced into taking up jobs as scavengers and sweepers. They provided the colonial rulers with a cheap and accessible source of labour to maintain a largely primitive and manually run system of disposing of waste and maintaining sanitation.

In this way, the colonial interventions aided by (caste Hindu) nationalists ensured that the labour of the Dalits gets institutionalised as labour meant for sanitary work, in the newly developed towns and cities. Like in and around Delhi, the *Bhangis*, the *Mehtars,* the *Chuharas* and the *Valmikis*, all Dalits sub-caste groups who used to be farm labourers, were inducted as sanitary workers, responsible for cleaning human and other wastes from the urban municipalities and even today they continue to constitute an overwhelming majority of sanitation workforce in the region (Prashad, 2000). This entrapment of Dalit labour as that meant for most defiling activities, in the urbanising cities, was contradictory to the belief of most thinkers, including Ambedkar, who 'thought that along with other modernising processes, urbanisation would offer the untouchables a much-needed opportunity to walk out from the constraining dark hole (in Ambedkar's view, the village system based on caste was a dark hole)' (Guru & Sarukkai, 2012, p. 90). This, as Ambekar also realised, was quite distant from reality. As sanitary systems and their constituent labourers got institutionalised, the casteist subconscious of most Hindus, middle and upper castes and Dalits also got strengthened. The Dalits instead of showing revulsion towards what they do, internalised it as their destiny, rationalising scavenging in the name of security and fixed income and began to exercise hereditary claims over toilets and latrines which they cleaned generationally (Singh, 2014). In the minds of the caste Hindus in urban areas, the ritual pollution associated with dirt and waste in turn polluted those dealing with it. This led to such implications wherein all that is dirty got personified into and as a class or community of Individuals and to be ritually pure is to maintain distance from both dirt/waste and such class or community of Individuals. Guru (and Sarukkai, 2012, p. 91) pointing in a similar direction elaborates that, 'in their (caste Hindus) perception, untouchables were mobile dirt and dirt was mobile untouchability.… The untouchable's image as 'walking dirt' was chained to his or her physical association and the experience of being 'a walking dirt', was sustained through the static nature of space.' This static nature of space around which dirt and those associated with it

are imagined has dire consequences for what qualifies as *'matter out of place'* in the Indian social environment.

The Hindu caste order's obsession with purity and pollution principles, ironically, never led to a concrete science of sanitation and waste disposal, and this again points to the expendability of the untouchable's bodies in the perception of caste Hindus (Geetha, 2009). The task of sanitising contemporary India, therefore, would have to take into consideration the institutionalised nature of ritual pollution associated with dirt, human waste and the labour of Dalits. Many previous interventions to sanitise the country have not achieved desired results or gained pan-nation popular support. Most of them happened to be caste agnostic in essence which can be attributed as a limitation and a reason for the continued uncleanliness of India or an *Aswachh Bharat*. A brief mention of a few prominent sanitation programmes, implemented in independent India, their framework, overall aim and quantum of success achieved, would help in contextualising the previous claim.

Sanitation and public health first find mention in government documents in 1954, as a part of the Indian government's first Five Year Plan. However, no concrete interventions were set in motion to improve sanitation as succeeding governments prioritise the growth of core industries, food security, and other developmental concerns. As a result, the 1981 national census delivered a rude awakening, that the rural sanitation coverage across the country was merely one per cent (Kumar, 2022). Hence, the administrators of the country, for the first time, realised the need for a dedicated policy for the development of sanitation facilities and in 1986, the Central Rural Sanitation Programme (CRSP) was launched. The CRSP focused not just on building sanitation facilities, thereby providing dignity and privacy to women, but also on the relationship between proper sanitation and health, which impacts the quality of life of the rural population (DDWS, 2007). For all its investment and infrastructure development, the coverage of proper sanitation facilities increased marginally under the CRSP programme (Hueso & Bell, 2013). With the failure of CRSP, to tackle the incessant lethargy of growth in sanitation coverage, the Total Sanitation Campaign (TSC) was introduced in 1999. The TSC reformulated the existing policy (CRSP) to make it more 'community led' and 'demand driven' by stressing on human resource and capacity development, information, education and behavioural change communication to increase awareness and generate demand for sanitary facilities, with the ultimate aim to provide 'sanitation for all' by 2012 (DDWS, 2007). However, TSC, like CRSP, remained unsuccessful, as it demonstrated a declining rate of net growth in overall sanitation coverage wherein population growth outstripped latrine construction and the number of rural households without latrines increased by 8.3 million. The reported progress under the programme was also exaggerated when compared with the data from the national census of 2011 (Hueso & Bell, 2013). Acknowledging that TSC has not lived up to its objectives, the government renamed and relaunched it as the Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (NBA) in 2013. The NBA was again renamed and relaunched in 2014, as the Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM). 'This history alerts us that name changes are not synonymous to changes in policy content' (Kedia, 2022, p. 2).

Susan Chaplin (1999) highlighted three factors that have prevented a successful sanitation movement from being replicated in India, in the way it happened in the UK, Europe and all of the West, during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they include; the political and administrative inability of local governments in India, suggesting weaknesses in the local municipalities, which apart from being a colonial remnant, are institutionally marginalised, lack capacity and finance to maintain infrastructure for proper sanitation and are immersed with political interference. Second, there is an absence of a 'threat from below' as the trade union politics in India, apart from being on a downturn, has largely remained limited to the formal sectors of employment. The unions have failed to acknowledge the nature of employment in the Indian unorganised sector. The workers in the unorganised sector, like most of those in the sanitation and waste economy, have historically been migrants, who came to expanding urban centres as they lacked the means to produce. The inexhaustible mass of unskilled labour which came to urban centres meant that the supply of manpower was always above demand leading to the commodification of labour and dissolution of powers to collectivise and bargain among the workers in unorganised economies, as among the Dalits who provided the sanitation services. Third, as modern medicine, science and technology developed, the middle classes (mostly caste Hindus and *Ashraf* Muslims) were able to insulate themselves from epidemic diseases, foul odours and unkempt spaces, by monopolising whatever services the state/municipalities provided and isolating themselves in gated communities.

This leads us to a scenario wherein any endeavour to clean India has not been reinforced by the pressures of a popular movement led by unions/collectives or by the sensitivities and civic consciousness of a burgeoning middle class. India remains unclean and, in the waste, and sanitation landscape, caste still remains the cornerstone for dividing labour, as proficiency for the occupations relating to sanitation and waste is still perceived as an ascribed virtue of individuals, which depends upon the sub-caste (*Jati*) they belonged to. This is the reality upon which one finds that another effort to clean India has been unveiled by the present Indian dispensation, by renaming NBA and sufficiently increasing the fund allocated for sanitation, i.e., the *Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM)*.

The Swachh Bharat Mission: Claims and Context

The SBM Phase I was unveiled on October 2, 2014 by the Prime minister, with the target of making India clean, or at least free from open defecation, in the next five years. There are two sub missions under the SBM: SBM - Rural and SBM - Urban. The SBM - Rural intends to make Gram Panchayats Open Defecation Free (ODF), sanitised and clean. It also wants to improve the levels of cleanliness in rural areas through solid and liquid waste management activities (DDWS, 2017). The immediate objective of SBM in rural areas is to make sanitary latrines accessible for private households thereby improving sanitation coverage, and subsequently, it seeks to develop community-based solid and liquid waste management systems. Along similar

lines, the SBM - Urban targets to achieve a hundred per cent ODF status, a hundred per cent scientific waste management, and change in the behaviour of the masses through 'Jan Andolan' (MoHUA, 2021). This course of action is quite unusual from a public policy perspective, in the following two senses, first, if one considers proper sanitation as a public good, requiring public investment, then any government policy should try to maximise the value of the public investment by funding public sanitation infrastructure (sewage lines, public toilets, solid and liquid waste management, treatment plants, etc.), at the same time incentivising people to invest in their own private sanitation facility. However, the SBM's approach is to subsidise the one-time construction of private sanitation facilities that mainly provide private benefits to those who have the ability to build and maintain them. Second, by just focusing on providing subsidies for private infrastructure, the policy subtly shifts the burden of managing solid and liquid waste and developing, operating and maintaining public infrastructure for it, on the public (Kedia, 2022). This implies that conventional social relations, regarding sanitation and waste management, will get consolidated, as access to toilets increases and so does the public demand for maintaining toilets and disposing of sanitary waste.

The SDG India Index and Dashboard prepared by NITI Aayog, the apex policy think tank of the government, shows that all the districts under the SBM - Rural have 100 per cent sanitation coverage and India is now verified to be ODF (NITI Aayog, 2020) This claim of India being ODF was first made by the Government of India on October 2, 2019, at the end of Phase I of the programme. However, this assertion has not gone uncontested, by both government and non-government institutions. A survey released by the National Statistical Office (NSO) one month after this claim was made, in November 2019 titled 'Drinking water, sanitation, hygiene and housing conditions in India', claimed that 'about 28.7 per cent of rural households across India still lacked access to any form of latrines. Moreover, 3.5 per cent of those who have access to latrines, don't use it' (*The Hindu data team*, 2020). Other studies have also contended government's claim, like the one reported by the Institute of Labour Economics in January 2019, which maintains that despite a significant increase in toilet ownership in rural India, 'the fraction of people who now own a latrine, but who nevertheless defecate in the open, did not change between 2014 and 2018' (Gupta et al., 2019). This research study tracked changes in 1,558 households of 157 villages of Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh and showed that 50 per cent of the population in these states still defecated in the open, indicating no improvement. This same study also reported on the survey conducted by Deshpande & Kapur (2018) in Udaipur, Rajasthan between April and June 2017 for the Accountability Initiative of the Centre for Policy Research, which found that of 82 per cent of toilets constructed in Gram Panchayats of Udaipur, only 70 per cent were functional and only 49 per cent were used regularly. The subsidy provided under the scheme has also been found to be insufficient, as a study exploring the perspectives on open defecation and latrine use, in rural Bihar, found that ₹ 12,000 provided by SBM-Rural, for latrine construction was not enough to cover the costs for poor households (Jain et al., 2020). This has

also been corroborated in another study[2] and considering the fact that SBM - Urban provides a much lower subsidy (of ₹ 6,500), we are left to ponder how this amount would be sufficient for toilet construction in urban areas. This contrast and relative insufficiency of subsidy among rural and urban areas again point to poorly envisioned policy goals as we circle back to the deficiencies in the policy design.

Apart from access and ownership, another aspect which impacts regular toilet use is the functionality and safety of the toilet constructed which is predicated by the technology used. The Department of Drinking Water and Sanitation (DDWS) (earlier a ministry) suggests that the twin pit pour flush toilet (TTPF) technology has been found to be the most responsive technical option in most geographies (DDWS, 2017) but it does allow for changes to the toilet technology or modification to TTPF toilets, depending upon the local context. Interestingly, in a study conducted by WaterAid India about the quality and sustainability of toilets being constructed under SBM, the key findings included: TPPF was used in 57 per cent of households, single pits in 22 per cent and septic tanks in 21 per cent. The study further stated that 31 per cent of the constructed toilets, nonetheless functional, were in fact unsafe (Srivastava, 2019). The TPPF latrines recommended by the government for rural households need to be emptied once full. This has resulted in many people wanting to get larger pits constructed, as they would not require frequent emptying. However, building larger pits increases the cost of constructing toilets beyond the amount of subsidy. The emptying of sludge from latrines is also another cost which the toilet-using household have to bear by hiring labourers or tankers, and '[A tanker] is a big cost. They take ₹ 2000, ₹ 2500 if poor people don't have it, of course, they'll defecate outside' (Jain et al., 2020, p. 6). This points to the persistence of revulsion among caste Hindus, from having anything to do with their faecal discards, which is considered ritually polluting. Instead, they opt to incur costs in hiring services, from sources of labour which they regard appropriate for such work, that is, mostly the lowest sub-castes among Dalits in that specific geography.

In fact, most types of technology that have been used for constructing toilets under SBM would require manual removal of sludge from pits, at some point, if not retrofitted and connected to piped sewage disposal systems. Like the TPPF toilets, recommended by DDWS, which consist of two alternating pits connected to a pour flush toilet, where blackwater or greywater is collected in the pits and allowed to slowly infiltrate into the surrounding soil. Over a period of time, the solids are dewatered and the sludge that remains has to be removed manually (Tilley et al., 2014; Tayler, 2018). Septic tanks, which are also very commonly constructed, 'retain solids, supernatant liquid and scum, and must be regularly desludged' (Tayler, 2018, p. 17). Similarly, other self-contained, on-site systems of sanitation like the single pit toilets, will also require removal of partly digested faecal sludge at frequent intervals (Tayler,

[2]Other research has also found that for the type of toilet preferred in rural India, the cost of construction of ₹ 12000/- is not enough. May refer to; Gupta, A., Khalid, N., Desphande, D., Hathi, P., Kapur, A., Srivastav, N., Vyas, S., Spears, D. & Coffey, D. (2019). Changes in open defecation in rural north India: 2014-2018. IZA discussion paper No 12065.

2018). An estimate suggests that a septic tank will need to be pumped out or emptied every five years, if it is serving 10 people, if it is serving 100 people it will need to be desludged every six months (Doron & Jeffery, 2018). Another estimate suggests that septic tanks designed and operated using best practices will require desludging at an interval of 2-4 years (Tayler, 2018).

The unpropitious state of India's sewage system makes it even more obvious who will service these pits once they start filling up, and needing to be emptied. Gatade (2015, p. 32) notes that 'the equation between excreta and pollution in Hindu society has led to the scandalous neglect of sewage management.' By 2020, as per the Central Pollution Control Board, of the 72,368 MLD of sewage which was generated, only 20,235 MLD, or about 28 per cent was captured by sewage in towns and cities and ended up at treatment plants (CPCB, 2020). Even in urban areas, as of the last Census, only 32.7 per cent of India was serviced by sewers (GoI, 2011). Hence, the emptying of pits and the handling of waste is indeed fundamental, but it remains largely undiscussed in policy documents of SBM Phase I. In recent times, while cleaning of septic tanks and pits in unsewered urban areas has become a well-established service, still 'the guidelines of SBM-Urban say almost nothing about how contained sludge is supposed to be collected and transported when the toilets and pits are emptied' (Prasad & Ray, 2019, pp. 339–340). The cleaning up of pits and tanks, which was a requirement for urban households is fast becoming a reality in rural India as well, replacing the cleaning of dry latrines. Those carrying the burden of cleaning remain unchanged.

In order to improve the system of solid and liquid waste management in villages, through developments in public infrastructure for waste collection and sewage disposal, the budgetary provisions for SBM - Rural do provide funds under the head of Solid Liquid Waste Management (SLWM) activities. This funding may well be considered a proxy indicator for the elimination of some of the most degrading menial jobs and improvements in the working conditions of those employed in the waste and sanitation economies, by acquiring better equipment and modern technologies. The funding under SLWM activities is capped at ₹ 7 lakh, ₹ 12 lakh, ₹ 15 lakh and ₹ 20 lakh for gram panchayats having up to 150, 300, 500 and more than 500 households, respectively. Under phase one of SBM - Rural, the grand total of expenditures from the Government of India on SLWM activities accounted for less than 1 per cent of all expenditures on SBM till 2018. In 2018-19 only 4 per cent of total GoI's expenditure under SBM was on SLWM and in 2019-20 (till 3 July 2019), on average, only 5 per cent of total expenditure from the SBM funds was on SLWM. This underscores the dismal state of funding for SLWM activities under SBM-Rural. If we consider the state-wise trends, in 2018-19, states like Kerala (83 per cent of total allocation), Himachal Pradesh (72 per cent), Haryana (37 per cent) and Andhra Pradesh (24 per cent) managed significant expenditure on SLWM, whiles states like Uttar Pradesh, Karnataka, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, Bihar and Odisha reported zero expenditure on SLWM activities. Similarly, in 2019-20 (till 3 July 2019) of the total funds allocated to states under SLWM activities, the highest share of expenditure

was done by Mizoram (91 per cent of total allocation), Meghalaya (30 per cent), Uttarakhand (21 per cent), and Himachal Pradesh (20 per cent). Conversely, 26 states and UTs reported no expenditure on SLWM out of GoI's SBM funds (Kapur & Deshpande, 2019; Kapur & Malhotra, 2020). On parallel footing, the SBM - Urban, in its first phase, also provisioned for funds to improve solid waste management systems and out of the total funds allotted, 68 per cent were released by GoI from October 2014 till September 30, 2019, with only five states and UTs receiving cent per cent allocation under the mission, including Andhra Pradesh, Assam, Gujarat, and Tamil Nadu. Whereas, ten states and UTs received less than 50 per cent of the total allotted funding including Uttar Pradesh (45 per cent), Kerala (43 per cent), West Bengal (41 per cent), and Uttarakhand (22 per cent). Of all the funds received under this head, only 40 per cent were utilised by the states and UTs (till September 30, 2019) where four states and UTs, namely Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Nagaland, and Puducherry, spent 100 per cent of the SWM funds received from GoI, on the other hand, 5 states and UTs, including Kerala, reported zero expenditure on SWM (Kapur and Malhotra, 2020). This further highlights the priorities of central and state governments when it comes to improving the solid and liquid waste management systems and eradicating caste-based menial jobs that pervade them.

As discussed, the hierarchies of caste prejudices are interwoven with the tasks of cleaning and transporting human waste (Doron & Jeffery, 2018). The SBM as a policy intervention, with its dedicated focus on private infrastructure, access and ownership, has it seems, remained reticent to recognise those who labour to provide for the availability, affordability and perpetuity of sanitary services, even with a dismal system of sewage and waste disposal. It is as if the policy isolates itself from the Indian social context and starts from an objectivated and detached stance of just cleaning India. However, as Mary Douglas's seminal work on ritual pollution and purity tells us, 'dirt … is never a unique, isolated event. Where there is dirt there is a system' (2003, p. 36). The SBM, in its non-recognition for the system of caste operating within the sanitation landscape, has all the potential to transmogrify into a structure which further institutionalises caste prejudices, in the medium and long run. In the sanitation and waste sector, the SBM continues to trammel upon the occupational choice of the Dalits and reeks of retrogression towards a colonial past.

In spite of the uninspiring performance during SBM Phase I, as the discussion earlier mentions, the SBM Phase II (2020–2025) has already shifted the goal post. The SBM - Rural, in this phase, focuses on the management of biodegradable waste from agriculture and husbandry, maintenance of ODF status and disposal of solid and liquid (DDWS, 2020). SBM Urban also shifted focus to wastewater management, disposal of garbage, management of faecal sludge, and more public awareness (MoHUA, 2021) However, without provisioning for trunk infrastructure and public toilets, without mandating sanitation standards and practices by law, without taking mismanaged urban local bodies to task and nudging those citizens who can afford private toilets to link up with trunk infrastructure, the SBM presents itself only as a poorly designed conditional cash transfer scheme (Kedia, 2022).

The policy document about the guidelines for Phase II of SBM mentions that 'Sanitation workers and Safai Mitras, a largely ignored section earlier, have become a key stakeholder for the Mission, with initiatives being taken to ensure safe, healthy and improved living conditions for them, and providing them with better livelihood options, dignity and respect' (MoHUA, 2021). Although, nowhere in the document one finds mention of specific initiatives which have indeed improved living conditions, ensuring safety and health, providing dignity, etc., to the sanitation workers. The same document mentions 'used water management' as a new complement included under phase II of the mission with two objectives: i) To safely collect, treat and reuse all used water to the extent possible and stop the discharge of untreated used water into water bodies or the open environment, ii) To collect, treat and reuse by-products from faecal matter and septage. But it does not lay out any provisions for how will the management of faecal sludge and septage be affected, especially from on-site sanitation systems (like septic tanks), apart from suggesting that urban local bodies may procure desludging/ cleaning equipment, or give contracts to private operators for this task. As researchers have shown, the cleaners of these septic tanks are mostly Dalits, who clean and dispose of the faecal sludge, without any form of protective gear and there is usually no designated place of dumping this sludge, which leads to indiscriminate disposal at sites like storm drains, open manhole and/or farmlands (Prasad & Ray, 2019). In many urban metropolises, the task of cleaning tanks and pits is now undertaken using trucks or other vehicles fitted with vacuum pumps and suction hoses, but this has its own limitation, as such vehicles cannot reach everywhere, even in urban areas, and are yet to penetrate rural settings. The fact remains that even in urban municipalities most sewage workers still have to enter sewers on a regular basis and also come into direct contact with human excreta in course of their work (Ingole, 2016), thus any claims by any institution regarding mechanisation of these processes remains disputed. The Government of India outlawed the practice of manual scavenging through two Acts, first in 1993 and then in 2013 by passing the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act. If one defines manual scavenging simply as dealing with human excrement with bare hands, then the legislature has not translated into any prohibition. In the Act, the definition of the practice of Manual Scavenging is quite conservative, with a specific focus on dry latrines and carrying of faecal waste with hands, rather than on any act which pertains to human contact with faecal waste. The enforcement of the provisions of the Act is also lacklustre. The rules laid down under the act state that no sewer worker should physically enter a manhole, however, in case of an aberration, only such a worker who has received proper training can enter a manhole or chamber, provided he is accompanied by a team of three, with one supervisor and the chamber has been tested, by holding a lead acetate paper over its opening, for inflammable or harmful gas. In the municipal corporation of a modern city like Pune, Ingole (2016) found that the sewage workers employed had not received any form of training whatsoever before entering a chamber and to judge the presence of combustible, toxic gases, they mostly used light a matchstick and hold it at the mouth of the sewer. This does provide a hint as to why '22,000 sanitation workers

reportedly die every year servicing India's sewers, sewage treatment plants, and septic tanks' (Tyagi, 2017, as mentioned in Prasad & Ray, 2019, p. 339). These deaths and the indignation of dealing with someone else's filth would not be ameliorated by just the construction of new toilets, which by themselves most certainly would not lead to the creation of a *Swachh Bharat*. The SBM, in order to achieve any semblance of success, would need to merge the construction of physical infrastructure with the social construction of a consciousness that enables the decoupling of caste and human waste in Indian society.

The prevalence of caste consciousness in Indian society was witnessed in two significant accounts of deaths that took place in February 2017. One was a Dalit research scholar from the University of Hyderabad. He had died by suicide, hanging himself, not before writing a poignant note. The reason behind it was a clash on campus between his Dalit organisation and a Bharatiya Janata Party-affiliated student organisation, which led to his subsequent ostracisation and institutional boycott, compelling him to suicide. The other account of death was of four Dalits who had died of asphyxiation after entering a septic tank at a Chennai hotel. Both these deaths found their way to a front page of a leading English daily, *The Hindu*, with varied prominence and column space, as the suicide of the research scholar garnered greater attention. Doron and Jeffery (2018) in the book claim that 'both these stories of appalling, avoidable deaths relate to problems of sewage, public sanitation, and ideas about purity in India.' This thought-provoking assertion is indeed suggestive of the all-pervasive nature of caste ideology in India and its operation within and outside the spheres of sanitation. The death of these individuals were not accidents, rather being born as Dalits were for all of them 'fatal accident'.[3]

Conclusion

The landscape of sanitation and waste in India presents unique challenges for its static composition and hereditary association. The Dalits or the untouchables are the ones who continue to carry the disproportionate burden of cleaning India. The flagship program to clean India, SBM, focuses on toilet construction and sanitation coverage and then doubles down these aspects through financial commitments and institutional arrangements specific to the program. In its larger vision to clean India, the program fails to see or purposely ignores the reality of caste that pervades the sanitation and waste collection operations across India. This strategic blindness of the state and of its interventions in sanitation is not a recent phenomenon, conversely, from colonial times all endeavours to sanitise public spaces in India have been framed with the assumption that labour from a certain community (the most backward castes among Dalits) would be easily and widely available to deal with the filth of the society. Administrators, whether imperialists or nationalists, do not have to regulate what they do not see.

[3]The research scholar, who died by suicide, in his last note refers to his birth as a 'fatal accident'. For more on this, kindly see; The Wire. (2019) https://thewire.in/caste/rohith-vemula-letter-a-powerful-indictment-of-social-prejudices

The SBM, similarly, does very little to challenge this assumption while doing a lot to strengthen the institutionalised nature of sanitation work in India, as it focuses on front-end aspects of access and use of toilets and ignores back-end aspects like removal, transportation and safe disposal of discarded waste. What this suggests is that as access and ownership of toilets increases, the question of removal and disposal will also become starker, and so would the need for services to haul and dispose of faecal waste from toilet pits.

This article starts with a narration, which tries to convey the transformative potential embedded in the act of seeing. The deliberate sight of the phenomena of cleaning sewers by a fellow human is revolting and enduring. It leaves with us a moral disgust towards the sensibilities of Indian social organisations. It makes it obvious that a '*Swachh Bharat*' cannot be achieved till caste Hindus keep perceiving some of our own as '*Aswachh Bharatiyas*'.

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