

Book Review

***Adrishya Bharat*, Bhasha Singh, 2012, Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd.,
New Delhi, pp.xv+212**

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The book under review is about Invisible India, which no one wants to realise. It shows the humiliated and deprived life picture of manual scavengers in India.

Interestingly, the book opens with very profound 'foreword' by one of the country's most prominent and senior social activist Mr. Bezwada Wilson who has done a pioneer work for the upliftment of manual scavengers, observed that 'due to scavenging, many students are enforced to drop out and continue manual scavenging'.

Manual scavenging is the practice of removal of human or animal waste/excreta (night soil) by using brooms, tin plates and baskets, mostly by women, from dry latrine and carrying it to disposal grounds some distance away. Manual scavenging is still practiced across India, even after 65 years of Independence in twenty-first century. Manual scavenging is the extreme form of discrimination and exclusively based on caste system. It is the most dehumanising and inhuman work, which is done by scheduled castes and tribes persons. It is also illegal work as there is an act on 'The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993', but neither the information about this act nor awareness is available even among the highly qualified persons. Its preamble states: 'Whereas fraternity assuring the dignity of the individual has been enshrined in the Preamble to the Constitution,.....and whereas the dehumanising practice

of manual scavenging of human excreta still continues in many parts of the country.....and whereas it is necessary to enact a uniform legislation for the whole of India for abolishing manual scavenging by declaring employment of manual scavengers for removal of human excreta an offence and hereby ban further proliferation of dry latrines in the country'. This act punishes the employment of scavengers or the construction of dry (non-flush) latrines with imprisonment for up to 1 year and/or a fine of Rs. 2,000/-. But there could not be found any victim of this act even after 19 years of its implementation, although manual scavengers are engaged in public sectors also like the municipality offices and other government offices as well as private homes.

M.K. Gandhi raised the issue of the horrible working and social conditions of Bhangis more than 100 years ago at the 1901 Congress session. During the independence movement, Gandhi and Ambedkar took up the issue of manual scavengers from different perspectives. Gandhi views that though he was sympathetic to the plight and suffering of Bhangis and even called himself a bhangi and appeared to glorify what was considered to be the Bhangis deplorable work, he protested against their legitimate right to strike to have their demands met and grievances addressed. During sweepers strike in Bombay in 1940s, Gandhi announced:

‘In spite of my close attachment to sweepers, better because of it, I must denounce the coercive methods they are said to have employed. They will thereby be losers in the long run. City folk will not always be cowed down. If they were, it would mean the collapse of municipal administration. Coercion cannot but result in the end in chaos. A bhangi may not give up his work even for a day. And there are many other ways open to him of securing justice. Refusal is a sign of weakness’.

On other hand, Babasaheb Ambedkar was very critical of the gandhian approach and methods to address the problems of the untouchables in general and of the Bhangis in particular. He was aware of the limitations of the Gandhian tactics with regard to the Bhangis and unlike Gandhi, he supported the sweepers strike. Gandhi and Ambedkar followed different approaches to the abolition of untouchability and the eradication of the practice of manual scavenging. The former advocated change of heart and morality on the part of the oppressor castes, while the later called for political praxis, agitation and legal intervention, especially, by the victims of the caste system. Dr. Ram Manohar Lohia wondered on 5 July 1967 in a Lok Sabha debate: ‘Has the government kept in mind the point that the wages of the scavengers be (so) fixed that caste feeling may end and that the people belonging to high castes may come forward to do this work’.

As per estimation, 1.2 million scavengers in the country are involved in the sanitation of our surroundings. The working conditions of these scavengers are so poor that they work on the risk of their lives. The health issue of these persons is very sensitive. By virtue of their work, they face various health problems like exposure to harmful gases, such as methane and hydrogen sulphide, cardiovascular degeneration, musculoskeletal disorders like osteoarthritic changes and intervertebral discherniation, infections like hepatitis, leptospirosis and helicobacter, skin problems, respiratory system problems and altered pulmonary function parameters. This can be prevented through engineering, medical and legislative measures.

The present work under review, conveniently has been organised into two major sections: the first section deals

with case studies of 11 states: Kashmir, Delhi, Bihar, West Bengal, Haryana, Uttar Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh and Karnataka. The second section deals about the legal provisions to eliminate the manual scavenging from the society.

The case studies are narration of author’s collection of factual information of manual scavengers of 11 states that they have been suffering from the agony, pain and injustice in the Indian society. The author presented the eye-opening fact of the case studies of Delhi, which is the capital city of the country, where the manual scavenging practice still exists. It shows the poor state of affairs that the institutional mechanism has not been extended to curb the inhuman and illegal practice even after more than six decades of country’s independence, which is the subject of shame for the nation. The National Commission for Safai Karmacharis was set up in 1993 located in Delhi to eliminate inequality in status of manual scavengers and ensure the social and economic rehabilitation of safai karamcharis, but in result no effective changes have been found among the safai karamcharis. The author further describes that the Parliament of the country has formulated and enforced the legal provision in 1993 for resettlement of the manual scavenging community, but not such dramatic changes has been found so far. All states have been represented by certain case studies, which were done by the author during her visit to these places. The author has presented the realities of the manual scavengers stories in two dimensions, first, the manual scavengers have been forced to continue this job because they belong to the lower strata of the hindu social order and second, less opportunities to get other professions. They are forced to bear caste atrocities.

The second section describes the double standard view of the state machineries, which has failed to eliminate this inhuman practice despite two-decade-old enactment. The author narrates that how these manual scavenging communities have been identified by different nomenclatures in different states, i.e., Dabbuwali in Bengal, Baltiwali in Kanpur, Uttar Pradesh, Teenawali in Bihar, Kamai ka Kam Karnewali in other northern

Indian states, Tokriwali in Haryana and Punjab, Thottikar (Dustbin) in southern India and Paki/Piti in Odisha. The book also carries an appendix of the legal provisions of the 'Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act 1993', information about various organisations working for welfare of manual scavenger. The book shows how manual scavengers are spending humiliated and deprived life.

In this book, 11 states have been covered but could not sufficiently demonstrate the life history of manual scavengers of such a vast country like India. The author did not suggest any innovative policy measures to bring manual scavengers in the mainstream of the society.

Overall, the book is a path breaking work, which presented various case studies of 11 states with factual information. This book also highlights the social prejudices towards a particular community. This book contains historical information of caste prejudice prevailing in the Indian society; it is useful for policy makers, academicians, researchers and practitioners to understand the social injustice, inequality, marginalization and deprivation of manual scavengers in the independent India.

Though, the book is in vernacular language, provides latest data, photographs and maps, also provides different nomenclatures of the manual scavenging community across country. The book is a rich source of information for all readers and researchers alike.