Chapter V

SCAVENGERS IN URBAN LABOUR MARKET

Following from the previous chapter, this chapter deals specifically with the occupation of scavenging, exploring the nature of work and the working conditions of the workers. It looks at the scavengers as an occupational group in organized as well as in informal sector of the urban labour market and their changing conditions in the city.

STRUCTURES, CATEGORIES, AND FUNCTIONING OF SCAVENGING

Tracing back the history of occupation of scavenging in the city some of the elderly respondents referred to their ancestors (Vadvao) who migrated from nearby villages and engaged in textile mills as sweepers. In each mill there were one or two sweepers. All sweepers were from Bhangi community. Other than sweeping the mills there were scavengers engaged in cleaning chawls and mohallas with the system of gharaki (employment), a form of customary rights among the scavengers. Every family was attached to one or more chawls in the area from whom they also received leftover food for their work. There was Warasdar (inheritance) system of employment wherein a member of the family got an employment in the same place.

The work consisted of all sorts of cleaning and scavenging including carrying dead animals like dogs and cats. Carrying night soil on head (mathe mailu) was being practiced and there was little technical assistance. The Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) in which a large number of scavengers are employed came in to being later on (see chapter I).

The occupation of scavenging in the city could be broadly distributed into two main categories, i.e. 1) organized sector and 2) informal sector. The sample survey indicates that 46 per cent (138) of them are employed in organized sector and 29 per cent (87) of them are engaged in informal sector as scavengers and sweepers (see table 4.1).
Scavengers in Organized Sector

Scavengers employed in organized sector work within structures of the respective government bodies and institutions. AMC alone has more than 8,000 permanent and around 2,000 non-permanent employees as sanitary workers and around 500 other personnel employed at various levels as sanitary inspectors (SI), sanitary sub-inspectors (SSI), local supervisors (mukadams) and linesmen to oversee the sanitary operation (see Appendix 5.1 - Structure of sanitary works in AMC).

Workers, works and the working conditions

The sweepers and scavengers working in AMC are distributed in three main departments, i.e. 1) conservancy 2) refuge (solid waste) and 3) sewage (manhole). The conservancy and refuge come under health department and sewage comes under city engineering department. The AMC has 43 election wards, which are divided into five main operating zones i.e. Central zone, West zone, North zone, East zone and South zone. Each ward is divided into a number of musters depending on its size.

A muster station is an office from where the sanitary operations are administered and supervised in each respective muster. Each muster is headed by a sanitary sub-inspector having specific responsibilities of demarcated areas known as beats under his
jurisdiction. The responsibility of the sub-inspector is to look after the attendance, distribute the daily work, make necessary arrangements in case of absent workers, attend to the complains of the workers and oversee the actual work. There are only three sanitary sub-inspectors (SSIs) in AMC who belong to the caste of Bhangis. The lower level ranks begin below the position of sanitary sub-inspector. Each muster has around five mukadams who look after a limited area and a number of Safaikamdars under his care. All mukadams are men and all of them are Bhangis. At the bottom line are the Safaikamdars, the workers.

It is mandatory for each Safaikamdar to assemble at the respective muster station every morning. Each worker has to sign in the daily register twice a day, first in the morning as he joins duty and second time in the afternoon when he resumes duty after the lunch break. He then takes the specific orders from the sanitary sub-inspector for the day. For all practical matters each sweeper is given his or her fix area to operate. However, everyday some adjustments have to be made, as some workers take weekly leave or may be absent for some reasons. For this purpose there are a number of relievers who replace such absentees. There are also ‘C’ register workers who are casual workers hired on daily basis. They are called on duty mostly to replace the permanent employees as per the needs. Each muster station has a provision for two to five such stand-by daily workers.

Hence, there are three types of workers at each muster: 1) Permanent sweepers known as “beat kamdar”, 2) Permanent reliever called “reserved kamdar” and 3) Daily workers or causal workers who are known as “hangami kamdar”. Among these Safaikamdars there are workers with different expertise according to the work demanded official note from the AMC says, Safaikamdars (sweepers) are allotted specific beats organized by wards. Their work is coordinated by Health Supervisors. AMC employees more than 7000 sweepers to cover an area of 190 sq. Km. The Safaikamdars sweep the streets, collect the waste and carry it in handcarts to stationary bins or mobile collection points. The number of collection points in the AMC area has been increased from 461 to 708. AMC collects over 1250 tons of waste every day from the city. This includes garbage from households, commercial areas and specialized markets and building debris. Over 80% of the garbage generated in a day is removed the same day.

A muster is also a place where union workers find it easy to get in touch with the members for the purpose of mobilization. Almost in all cases some or the other union workers are active in each muster station attending to complains of the workers and to check the working conditions. When the union receives complains from a particular muster station then a union leader or worker attends to them in that respective muster station with its SSI. The mukadams at many places play the role of the representative of the union.

The rule is once the person working on daily basis completes his 900 days of continuous work has to be made permanent. Therefore, daily workers are not kept continuously at work. Each permanent worker has right to one weekly off, a month of fixed annual leave and 10 days of sick-medical leave and other government facilities like provident fund. The daily workers are not eligible for such benefits.
in the area, for example 1) ‘General sweepers’ who sweep roads and common places 2) ‘Jape workers’ who clean common toilets and urinals 3) ‘Gully Trap (GT) workers’ working on small gutters 4) ‘Manhole workers’ who actually come in the department of solid waste and 5) a ‘Squad for solid waste’ for moving heavy wastes.

The distinction of works and duties are clear and one will not do the work of the other or other type of work, e.g. a scavengers working on small gutter will not open a big drainage gutter line even if it is overflowing when he is present in that area or a sweeper would not clean common toilets and urinals. However, on some occasions, festivals or any common event in a particular location, the regular workers may not be able to cope with the workload. In such situation the SSI appoints a number of workers of the same category on the job. This is known as “tolakam” (group work).

As mentioned above, the nature of work, workers and working conditions vary according to the job. The most difficult, dangerous, and dehumanizing labour is that which is carried out by Manhole workers underground, the Jape workers at the nuisance spots and those who carry out post-mortem, and disposing of the dead bodies.

The manhole workers

The population of Ahmedabad city has grown rapidly over last four decades. The residential areas have also increased over the years, extending the geographical boundaries of the city on all sides. However, public amenities like water supply, sanitation, and drainage have not been able to keep pace with the growth. The city has a combined sewerage system, i.e. the domestic waste, industrial effluent and storm waters which are allowed to flow into the same sewer lines. The responsibility of maintenance of sewerage lines lies with the AMC. Manhole department is primarily responsible for keeping the

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7 Nuisance spots are the open spaces used for defecation in the absence of toilet facilities. Often open spaces next to the public toilets too are used for such purpose when the number of toilets is not sufficient to the density of the population or the toilets are not useable.

8 One of the traditional works of the Bhangi men in rural social order was to be attendants of the cremation ground. The attendant of the cremation ground normally carried out the responsibility of cremating the dead bodies and in exchange took away the clothes and other gifts placed with the dead body. In urban areas, addition to work of the attendant of the cremation ground, the Bhangis employed as scavengers in Hospitals help out in the post-mortem of the dead bodies. Similarly, on occasions of emergencies like accidents, natural disasters, communal riots, etc scavengers are called on to dispose the dead bodies. The association of the Bhangi scavengers with “death” is one of the main reasons for the practice of untouchability and for the fear of the Bhangis among other caste people (see chapter VII).
underground sewerage system working, whereas the smaller pipelines are maintained by the Gully Trap Department.9 The sewerage network that carries the household and industrial discharge to the main sewer lines is divided into two types, 1) Main sewers which is 20-30 feet in diameter and 2) Pipe sewers 10-12 feet in diameter.

There are three types of workers involved in sewerage network maintenance and disposal. 1) Machine operators: they do not go inside the sewer lines, but use machines to remove the clogging and cleaning of the sewer lines; 2) Manual workers: they go inside the sewer lines for cleaning and clearing operation when machines fail to do the same and 3) Divers: they actually swim through the sewer pipelines and find out the blocks and clear it. The lineman and the manhole sub-inspector oversee these workers.

Here is an example of an operation underground by the manhole workers of Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and all of them are members of the Manhole Kamdar Union.10

It was 10 am, a winter night in the month of December 2003. A team of six manhole workers of Naroda muster station arrives at the Naroda Himmatnagar highway. Some block inside another drainage caused the overflowing of drainage, which was at a distance. It was identified during the day. When residents go to sleep, the water taps and outlets from the residential areas slowly become dry; the industrial flow becomes less and the traffic around on the road slows down; then it is a bit easy to work in sewers underground. That’s the reason why nighttime is preferred for work by manhole workers.

It is 24 ft sewer, narrow but deep. The lid of the sewage was taken off for some time for the gas to flow out before one could peep in. With the help of a small torch the linesman inspected the drainage from the top. One could see the flow from smaller outlets still falling in and the dirty water being collected. The water is pumped out with the help of a diesel pump. However, one could not stand for long peeping in, as the stink was strong and not easily bearable. Rameshbhai, age 30 gets ready with just his shots, ties a strong long rope around his waist and gets down as two of the helpers hold the rope on top and other lights the dark drainage with the torch. Ramesh dips in up to his neck, extends his hands and feet inside the blocked water to identify what blocks the water;

9 The small gutter lines are extensively laid in the Central zone, especially in old city where traditional residential Pol and chawls are located. The workers go regularly to different area for checking as well as for cleaning.

10 This is the Union specifically of the manhole workers initiated by the Kamdar Swasthya Suraksha Mandal (KSSM) and now managed by the workers themselves. The Union formed in 2001 has nearly 400 members and have conducted a number of programs for its members. It has organized four public protests for the cause of the manhole workers and have submitted so far fourteen memorandums to various local authorities demanding their rights. The members of this Union are also members of the Nawkar Mandal (see details in last section on Trade Unions).
exchanges take place between him and those on top; what they had thought (their theory) was confirmed. A small wall had to be broken inside the sewerage. Ramesbhai comes up for a short break. His body is totally drenched with the dirty water and as he shivers he warms up at the little fire that was put up by his companion outside and gets in once again.

The instruments are passed on to him from top, lowering down carefully with a bucket tied to a rope. He works inside, inconveniently as there is very little space to move around and cleaning his face with the same wet hands to breathe a little. He often looked disappointed and desperate to come out as breaking the wall is difficult. He gives it one more attempt. The entire operation lasts for two and half hours as he finally manages to break the wall inside and the stagnant water begins to flow to the main sewers. He comes out, takes a little wash with some water at neighbouring shopping complex and dries up himself as he warms at the fire. It was three at night and there was no one on the normally busy highway except the team of manhole workers.

Ramesbhai who is one of the few scavengers migrated from Rajasthan says the following:

I am a Bhangi but I work with honesty. Who would work in these dangerous drains? I too do not like to work but I convince myself before I get into the sewerage that I have to do. I make compromise with myself. But when I come out I feel like a prisoner who has just come out of a jail. If there are people around I feel ashamed to walk and even my co-workers stand far. Often when I sit for my dinner I remember the scene and the smell. At times I begin to doubt myself, have I come to this world by committing some crimes in the previous birth?

In 1997 a medical check up was conducted as part of a scientific study among 400 workers who work inside the sewer lines in the city of Ahmedabad. The check up revealed that all the workers were found to have more than one ailment related to respiration problem, urinary tract infection, eye and ear infection, back aches and skin infections (Morris and Sarkar 1997). The medical team of doctors linked the health problems of the workers to the hazardous work environment. The second part of the scientific study mentioned above was to test the water and air from nine manholes covering the five zones of the city of Ahmedabad for the purpose of studying the environment prevailing in the sewers when the workers carry out their jobs and to understand the occupational hazards that they face at work.

11 Two local NGOs, Kamdar Swasthya Suraksha Mandal (KSSM) and Unnati conducted the study with the help of experts in the field of environment engineering and qualified technicians from Centre for Environment Education, and Centre analyzed the samples for Sustainable Environment and Heritage, New Delhi.
The study reveals that the workers are exposed to dangerously high levels of chemical and biological pollutants particularly in the city’s eastern part where most industries are located. The study confirmed the presence of toxic chemicals like Ammonical Nitrogen, Chlorides and Hydrochlorides, Sulphates and Nitrates (Morris and Sarkar 1997). Further, the study also revealed that often the workers are unaware of the deadly poisoning taking place into the sewers due to the dumping of waste from the industries. Similarly the study also listed various possible effects of different chemicals on the workers.

There are various risks involved in sewerage work. When the workers enter the manhole they are exposed to poisonous gases, which cause health problems, and any time can be fatal. They generally drink alcohol before entering the pipeline thinking that if they drink, the smell will not affect them so much. Deaths have occurred from gassing and asphyxiation (lack of oxygen). Hauslaprasad Misra, writes in Financial Express\(^\text{12}\) that according to the official data, due to poisonous gas and chemicals in the sewers eight to ten workers die every year. From 1985 to 1995 every year four deaths of manhole workers are reported, whereas after 1995 it increased to 8 to 10 deaths ever year.\(^\text{13}\) A number of such cases are reported in the local newspapers every now and then. Accidents and injuries are common at workplaces as the working conditions at sewerage deposits are dangerous.

These workers do not have the access to even basic health services, drinking water and water for cleaning themselves at the workplace (see the example of actual operation described above). To perform the task, the manhole workers are provided with a few tools. They are not provided with any equipment to test the environment in the sewer before entering them. Although machines are available, mechanized cleaning of sewer is rarely


\(^{13}\) Indian Express, Ahmedabad (29\(^{th}\) May 2005) has the following details on page 1 of its Sunday News-line: 3 SAFAI WORKERS CHOKE TO DEATH. In the same page the following details are inserted: 1 month, 11 deaths (May 28\(^{th}\), Three Safai workers die in Ahmedabad; May 26\(^{th}\) Two die in Palanpur; May 7: Two workers die in Waghodia; April 18: Four workers killed in Vadodara). These above incidents are only a small fraction of the number of cases of deaths that occur of the Safai kamdars that go under the gutters to clean up the choke up created by the city dwellers and who sacrifice their lives. These lives are lost only due to the criminal negligence of the concerned authorities that do not provide safety measures. The fire brigade stipulates that: 1) A poison detector machine must be used to detect the presence of poisonous gas 2) If gas is detected adjoining manholes should be opened to lessen its severity and 3) Those who enter a tank should wear a breathing apparatus.
done. The workers are not provided with even basic protective devices like PVC suit, hand gloves, gumboots, torches or respiratory apparatus.

They are paid a meager risk and dirt allowance every month. There are no training programmes on safety measures for workers taking high risk going underneath in the dangerous zones. There is no separate safety officer in the Corporation and no legal requirement is there for the protection of health and safety of the workers. Any form of automation is lacking and most of the work is performed manually in the absence of the barest of protective device and gear (Morris and Sarkar 1997). It is informed that there is no life insurance for such workers. Similarly many of the policies have remained on the paper.

On 22 November 2002, Manhole Kamdar Union organized a rally from Victoria Garden to Sabarmati Ashram to protest against the Municipal authority for not paying heed to their longstanding demands. The chief guest of the rally was the widow of one of the manhole workers who died while working in sewerage. The charter of demands was symbolically submitted to Mahatma Gandhi, by placing their documents at the feet of the statue of Gandhi at Sabarmati Ashram.\(^{14}\)

**Manual scavenging at “nuisance spots”**

Although the practice of carrying night soil on head is legally abolished, the work carried out by a number of Safai-kamdars of AMC, especially those working as jape workers at nuisance spots provides evidence of the contrary. It is found even today in one of the largest Municipal Corporations. The Safai-karmacharis of AMC are found engaged in manual scavenging and carrying night soil on head. It was reported in one of the local newspapers\(^ {15} \) after due investigation that such inhuman activities were being carried out at 27 locations in the city in the year 2003.

\(^{14}\) The follow up report of the Corporation responding to the charter of demands shows that many of the demands are considered to be policy matters, so referred to higher authority (labour officer). Some of the demands are already met as per the authority so overruled and a few demands are being considered and referred to the zonal authority for implementation.

\(^{15}\) See *Divya Bhaskar*, Ahmedabad, Thursday, 30 October 2003.
Thus, the problem of carrying night soil was highlighted once again in Gujarat. The Worker’s Union “Nawkar Mandal” working for the Municipal employees raised the issue with members of SC-ST Commission who visited the city; the leaders of the Union went on hunger strike and the Safai-karmacharis went on protest dhrana. The Lok Adhikar Sangh filed a public litigation in Gujarat High court. Various local newspapers carried the news for a few days. The Safai-karmacharis who have been doing this work for day in and day out received some sympathy and visibility for a while.

The authority perceives the scavengers as the indispensable functionaries of the state and scavenging is counted as one of the essential services. The Safaikamdars feel that they have been given different treatment as compared to what the other government servants get, like the medical Doctors working in AMC hospitals. A number of them have also expressed that they have been deprived of basic necessities at workplace. They work in most unhygienic and hazardous conditions. But the Corporation does not consider their services. The social hierarchy of labour is visible in the differential treatment given to the scavengers by the state through its local bodies.

Ganpatbhai a non-permanent worker (a reliever) who works in Shahpur ward of AMC has a duty to clean the public toilet and nuisance spots around. He has to clean the human excreta and a heap of rotten garbage of household wastes, clothes, plastics, vegetable garbage, leftover food, etc. He was doing the work with a hand broom and a handkerchief on his nose. He did not have mask or hand gloves as he worked. He had with him a tiny tin sheet (patra) to fill the dirt and a wheelbarrow to carry the garbage to the main dustbin depot, which is at the distance of a kilometer.

He was doing this work at the common toilet block adjoining Shahpur health staff quarters, one of the oldest quarters for Safaikamdars in the city.\textsuperscript{16} Ganpatbhai says,

Nobody can clean this without drinking alcohol. I do not have habit of drinking. It is very difficult.

Most of the toilets are blocked and the people defecate outside in the open space. There is no water

\textsuperscript{16} Almost from every house in this quarters there is someone working in the Corporation as Safaikamdar. The sanitation conditions at the quarters are very poor. Some of the households have built their own toilet-bathroom in the house itself. However a large number of them do not have toilet facilities. They use common toilets provided by the Corporation adjoining the quarters. There are two toilet blocks, each having four toilets for women and four for men. Since long the toilets allotted for women have been dysfunctional as they are absolutely blocked and unusable. On the other side the block that is allotted to men one of the four toilets is dysfunctional. Almost all children during the day and some elders at night defecate in the open space around the toilet blocks. There is no running water facility available in the toilet blocks. A tap connected to an open water tank, which is supposed to be used for cleaning toilets, is dysfunctional.
facility. I carry a few buckets of water from neighbouring house to clean the toilets. Some time I ask the muster station to send a water tank when the toilets are absolutely blocked. They do come occasionally. I clean the open space without water just with a broom. I have complained about the situation to the supervisor and sanitary sub-inspector who visit occasionally to check the work. But nothing happens.

A sanitary sub-inspector present in one of the muster stations of the city says the following about the practice of carrying night soil in the city.

Everyone from commissioner to Union leaders knows about it. The Union leaders made a big issue out of it recently for their own reasons and commissioner denied the existence of such things. But the fact is some of our workers have to do it. There is no choice. We know it exists in the city and there is no way out. We take more practical approach to the problem than making it an issue. We make compromises with the workers. We know they do difficult work so we give them some concessions and leverages. However, it is not like the earlier practice of carrying night soil on head. There is no “dabba” system (dry latrines) in the city, which was there earlier in some areas. The workers had to carry those tins of night soil on head. But today it has taken a different form.

In some areas there are not enough toilets and in some places there are “pay and use” toilets run by Sulabh Shauchalaya, which poor people can’t afford. (Due to the lack of public toilets 4.50 lakh citizens use open land for defecation in different parts of the city). These are known as squatting nuisance spots. There are a number of such spots in the city. Our workers have to clean it manually. We know it is difficult but we tell them ‘there is no way out, you have to do it. There is no progress without cooperation. We too will cooperate with you when you need.’ They do it.

We are also aware that those engaged in such hazardous work suffer from various health problems. Their lives are reduced to half of their age. Eye problems, the problem of T.B. and heart disease are common among our sanitary workers. But the work is being done and everyone knows about it. The Union people and we have better collaboration and all of us take more practical compromising approach to handle the situation.

**Manual scavenging and policy issues**

Manual Scavenging is a term evolved in bureaucratic and legal language to describe the vocation of cleaning human shit from public or private latrines, and carrying it to disposal sites. A special law was considered necessary to deal with the most distressing discrimination based on work and descent called manual scavenging. The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, legally

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17 One of the Health Officer of the Corporation provided this data to the Members of National Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Commission during their visit to Ahmedabad, 31.10.2003.
banned the manual scavenging.\textsuperscript{18} The law itself describes this as a “dehumanizing practice” and is intended to make it obligatory to convert dry latrines into water-seal latrines. For the implementation of the Act the National Commission for \textit{Safai-karmacharis} was appointed.

Rehabilitation and liberation of the scavengers has been one of the important concerns, which have been expressed, in various attempted programs and policies of central and various state governments. Soon after independence a number of commissions and committees were appointed by the Government of India and by some state Governments to look into the working and living conditions of the scavengers: the Barve Committee (1958), Backward Classes Commission (1953), Malkani Committee (1961), National Labour Commission (1968-69), and by some state Governments: Haryana (1969-70), Kerala (1971), Karnataka (1976), Government of Saurashtra (Vyas Samiti - 1956) and Gujarat, Department of Social Welfare (1972). In 1994, the government of India constituted a National Commission for \textit{Safai-Karmacharis} under the National Commission for \textit{Safai-Karmacharis} Act, 1993, to suggest measures to abolish scavenging by the end of the Eighth Plan (1995) and rehabilitate sanitary workers.

These committees and commissions appointed by government have provided the most authentic information\textsuperscript{19} and have made a series of recommendations to improve the lot of sweepers and scavengers (Chaplin 1997; Srivastava 1997; Shinoda 2002a).

\textsuperscript{18} Despite such laws, manual scavenging continues. The National Commission of \textit{Safai-Karmacharis}, a statutory body set up as required in the 1993 Act, in its report of 1997, acknowledged the neglect of this law by state governments. The National commission (1997) described manual scavengers as ‘the most oppressed and disadvantaged section of the population’ who are ‘totally cut off from the mainstream of progress’.

A 2002 report prepared by the International Dalit Solidarity Network says that according to the government estimates there are one million Dalit manual scavengers in India. International NGO Action Aid India's random survey in 2002 of six states - Madhya Pradesh, Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan and Bihar - claimed that manual scavengers were found in at least 30,000 dry toilets. The scavengers belong to the Bhangi community (Sachin Kumar - http://www.indiatogether.org/2005). Manual scavenging in various degrees takes place in all Indian states except Goa, the North-East and Kerala. The worst states are Bihar, Rajasthan, Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa (Thekaekara 2000). According to Government sources nearly 7.87 lakh persons were still engaged as scavengers all across the country. A Supreme Court bench, passing orders on a petition from the \textit{Safai-karmachari Andolan}, emphasized on complete eradication of the practice and simultaneous rehabilitation of all scavengers within a timeframe. The Court sees that there is a lack of will to implement the Act (The Hindu, May 4, 2005, New Delhi. Pp.15).

\textsuperscript{19} However, reviewing contents of these committee reports, their approach and methodology one observes that there was absence of adequate documentation of life-styles, habitation, familial and social relations, cultural and religious beliefs, traditions, customs etc. There was hardly any reference to social, political and cultural organizations existing among the sweepers and scavengers (Vivek 2000).
Many recent studies have been focused on the living and working conditions of the scavenger castes and the impact of different welfare programmes by the Central and State governments for their liberation and rehabilitation (see Srivastava 1997; Peer 1992). An evaluative study (Gulalia 2003) provides an overview of the efforts carried out to liberate and rehabilitate them pointing to the fact of failures of such schemes.

National policies and programs to eliminate scavenging and rehabilitating scavengers have been in operation since 1991. But it has achieved little so far (Chandra 1999). Some studies have emphasized the efforts to get rid of manual scavenging and the eradication of untouchability (see Sachchidananda 2001; Sinha et al 1994; Khan and Dassi 1998). The *Sulabh Shauchalaya* movement envisages conditions and services which provide educational and occupational choices to scavengers, paving the way for their educational, occupational and social integration into the mainstream (Pathak 1991).

The annual survey statistics of the Ministry of Welfare-1995-96 have identified 40,000 scavengers for rehabilitation in Gujarat. Scavenging has remained a caste-based occupation in Gujarat and has become a source of their exclusion from socio-political and cultural domains of society. Their dehumanizing living conditions specifically those engaged in the practice of carrying night soil on head are pathetic (Trivedi 1996; Parmar 1996, 1996a). In June 1997, the Government of Gujarat adopted the Central Government’s Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines Prohibition Act 1993, abolishing the practice of manual scavenging and carrying night soil on head.

*Safai Vidyalaya*, a sanitation institution was set up by the *Harijan Sevak Sangh* at Ahmedabad under the leadership of Shri Ishwar Bhai Patel and entrusted with the implementation of “*Bhangi Kashta Mukti*” Programme. The institution has contributed in the field of sanitation, especially in conversion of dry latrines into pour-flush sanitary ones to eradicate the sub-human practice of carrying night soil as head load by the scavengers. The available information shows that by 1988, the total number of 1.05 lakh dry latrines were converted (1.05 lakh in urban areas and 0.75 lakh in rural areas). An evaluative study of low cost sanitation in Gujarat (1991) revealed that most of the scavengers’ children are unemployed in-spite of their educational attainment at different levels. This has caused restlessness and tension in the scavenger community (B.N. Srivastava 1997: 46).
Thekaelara (1999) while focusing the attention on the practice of manual scavenging in the context of the Ranpur case in Gujarat asserts that so far little has changed. The author suggests that there is a silent and shameful opposition in India to the eradication of untouchability. The Bhangis are trapped in a system ordained by the caste structure, which impedes rehabilitation and movement into alternative work.

There were very few active movements and protests among the scavenger community of Gujarat for social change. Nitin Gurjar (2004) narrates three historical events, i.e. the strike of sanitary workers in 1911, 1946 and the strike of sanitary workers of Viramgam for self-dignity. He argues that the scavenger community, usually so subdued, can assert back when time comes. There is a paradoxical situation among the scavengers of Gujarat. Simultaneously, they show the internalization of a psychology of the oppressed and the monopoly of their labour as the indispensable functionaries. Nevertheless, there are signs of awakening consciousness among scavengers of their paradoxical conditions. The scavengers of Urban Gujarat have begun to respond to this social reality (D’Souza 2004). The cases of Ranpur and Ahmedabad city are some indications of such response.

**Scavengers in Informal Sector:**

Of the total 300 respondents 39 per cent (87) are engaged in informal sector as scavengers and sweepers. This shows that a large number of scavengers work in informal sector. However, there is not much information available about their exact numbers and

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20 Having the documentary proof of the continuance of manual scavenging, Navsarjan Trust, an Ahmedabad based NGO working among Dalits, initiated legal action in 1995 on behalf of 35 Safai Karmacharis in Ranpur town in Dhandhuka taluka of Ahmedabad district for the prosecution of government officials on the charge of negligence for the continuance of the practice. The state government reacted to the case by denying the existence of the system. The high court appointed a commission to look into the case of Ranpur scavengers. The campaign forced the Government of Gujarat on 3 March 1997 to adopt the Central Government Employment of Manual scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines prohibition Act 1993. The final order of the court came on 18th September 1997 directing the state Government to draw up a time bound schedule for total abolition of this practice of manual scavenging and carrying night soil on head, in Gujarat (details see Macwan 1998).

21 The informal sector or unorganized sector has no clear cut definition but the National Commission on Labour in India 1966 described it as ‘those workers who have not been able to organize in pursuit of a common objective because of constraints such as casual nature of employment, ignorance and illiteracy, small size of establishment per person employed, scattered nature, etc. The unorganized sector does not have clear-cut employer-employee relationship, employment guarantees and lacks most forms of social protection and security (Louis 2004: iv). Scavengers working in private housing societies, private institutions and offices, areas that are not directly under government control and those working under contractors come in the purview of informal sector.
work. Scavengers in informal sector are unorganized and have no set up or mechanism to organize themselves. The occupation of scavenging in informal sector functions at two levels. 1) An individual or a family finds scavenging work for themselves directly from the other concerned party, i.e. private housing societies, private institutions or any other place of work. 2) A scavenger finds employment with a private contractor

**Individual – family employment**

The scavengers in this category find their employment at two levels, 1) as an individual labourer and 2) as family. At individual level the scavengers in informal sector work basically as wage earners. They are employed by individuals or institutions to do the scavenging works either on daily basis or for a longer duration. They do not get any benefits and privileges.

The traditional jajmani system of employment (gharaki) functions at the level of family or the household. In this system who and how many people do the work is not the concern of the employer but the entrusted work should be done by those employed who will have the right to ask for leftover food in the evening along with fixed wages at the end of the month. At some places they are partly paid in cash and partly in kind (left-over food/gifts). The gharaki is a long-term employment and at many places it is handed over from one generation to the other.

The urban context, however, has brought in a number of variations to the traditional form of jajmani. At many places, especially in newer residential areas scavengers do not have “customary rights” over the working area, which they can hand over to other scavenger. These scavengers working in private residential areas are often asked to discontinue if the employer is not satisfied with their work.

At many places, scavengers in informal sector work with a combined system, which include elements of both, the traditional jajmani system and the daily-wage labour. A group of women, who live in Harijan vas in Naranpura described the details as follow:

We go to private housing societies to sweep. We reach the workplace by 7 am and return home after finishing the work. Some of us are able to finish the work by 12 noon and some come back at around 4 in the evening. It all depends on the load of work and the number of people working in the area. It is a private work. We, four of us from the household go together and finish the work as early
as possible. (One of them specified) I take my daughter-in-law and daughters along. Sometimes my son also comes. My daughters and son are educated but they come for this work so that I can finish the work as early as possible. We have twelve buildings to clean. Each household pays rupees 10 each per month. From many houses we also get leftover food. Normally we have to clean the common staircases of each block and the open spaces in the building. When it is not possible for us to go to work we have to ask our friends or relatives to take care of cleaning of the residential areas.

**Employment with contractors**

With ever-growing urbanization and emerging residential and commercial complexes and institutions of all types, the number of private contractors taking up cleaning and sanitary work has increased manifold in recent years in the city. The private contractors could be broadly classified into three categories. There are small private contractors from the community of Bhangis itself taking up smaller contract, which are handled by the members of the family along with relatives and neighbours.

The second category of contractors are those who could be termed as big contractors who have financial capital to invest and are influential to get the contract from the other party. Every contractor has to fill a tender and one selected by the authority gets the contract. These contractors are mostly from the upper caste groups and hire large number of sweepers and scavengers from Bhangi community. These types of contractors undertake contract of much larger volume and spread in larger areas.

The third type of contract is organized cooperative type, one being experimented by Self-Employed Women Association (SEWA). *Saundarya Safai Utkarsh Mahila Seva Sahakari Mandali Ltd* is a wing of SEWA, engaged in private cleaning operation in commercial complexes, residential towers, societies and institutions. It has around 500 total members. This cooperative is only for Dalit women who are poor. Most of the women are from *Vankar, Chamar* and Bhangi caste groups. The coordinator of the program mentioned that the cooperative has Bhangi women (25-30) for specific work of cleaning of the toilets and bathrooms. The *Vankar* or *Chamar* women would not do the cleaning of toilets, as they have to do other office work including serving water. However, she informed that there is a Bhangi woman on the board of executive committee.
SCAVENGERS IN URBAN LABOUR MARKET

The respondents were asked the obvious yet the basic question why someone from the family was engaged in scavenging work. The respondents gave three main reasons. A large number of them (34 per cent) perceived it as the tradition of the family. Since it is considered as the traditional family occupation someone from the household continues the occupation. However, 25 per cent of them said there is no other alternative but to engage in this occupation. Since many of them have no other skills or education there have no easy opportunities in other occupations in the city. Nearly 35 per cent of them did not see any moral dilemma in responding to the question, as they see no difficulty in doing the job as it provides livelihood (see table 5.1). On account of belonging to the caste of the Bhangis it is easy to get an employment in this occupation but the caste factor becomes an obstacle to the employment in other occupations.

Table: 5.1 - Main reasons for doing scavenging work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>It is our traditional family occupation</td>
<td>103</td>
<td>34.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No other alternatives-No education, no other work as we are Bhangis</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>24.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Provides livelihood</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>34.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No scavengers in the household</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>6.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>300</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The reasons stated above make it amply clear why 84 per cent (236) of the respondents said they would not like to give up scavenging work. They argued saying that there are even less possibilities of getting jobs in other occupations. If they leave scavenging then they would be unemployed. Only 16 per cent (45) respondents said they would like to give up the scavenging work.

The major reasons given for such willingness are 1) it gives little income where we have to do difficult and hard labour, 2) others look down at us and 3) it promotes untouchability. It is important to note at this point that of the total, 103 households (34 per cent) have the presence of members engaged in occupations other than scavenging.22 When

22 The occupational composition of the surveyed households indicate three categories, 1) those households (66 per cent - 197) in which members are engaged only in scavenging related occupations, 2) those households (only 6 per cent - 19) in which members are engaged only in occupations other than scavenging and 3) those households in which there are members engaged in both types of occupations, i.e. scavenging as well as non-scavenging – 28 per cent (84) households are of this category. The distribution of households in these three categories shows that there is a continuity of traditional occupation of scavenging by a large number of households belonging to the members of the Bhangi community in the city. On the other hand, only a small proportion of households have moved away from traditional occupations.
asked what were the reasons for taking up these occupations, more than 53 per cent of them (55) said that they ‘do not find scavenging work’.

Those who continue the occupation however, do not find the field open, as it was a decade ago. It has become a ground for contestation. The following perceptions of the respondents on the changing scenario in finding employment in the occupation of scavenging highlight various problems related to the occupation over last one decade or so in the city.

Table: 5.2 – Employment opportunities in scavenging work

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Was it easy to get scavenging work ten/twenty years ago?</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
<th>NA</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>145</td>
<td>136</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Do you think it is easy to get scavenging work nowadays?</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the total, 48 per cent of the respondent said it was easy to get scavenging work ten to twenty years ago; whereas only 6 per cent of them said, now too we can find some employment in scavenging occupations in the city. Little over 45 per cent of them said it was not so easy to get scavenging work a decade ago. But the situation has changed drastically, little more than 87 per cent of the total respondents said it is difficult to get scavenging work nowadays (see table 5.2). What has brought about this change? What basis do the respondents provide for their perceptions on changing situation? Table 5.3 gives the reasons why it is difficult to get scavenging work now. Some of the reasons have been explained in details in the next section.

Table: 5.3 - Reasons for not being easy to get scavenging work nowadays.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reasons</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Private contract system in scavenging work</td>
<td>112</td>
<td>42.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Government is not recruiting more workers</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>22.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other caste people are getting into this occupation</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>16.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Too many labourers migrated from villages</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>12.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technology has improved so less work</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>5.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>262</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Marginalization of Scavengers in Organized Sector

Privatization of scavenging work

A decade ago the Bhangis engaged in scavenging work thought the occupation was their secured domain for employment and had not thought that other caste people and private agencies would enter into this occupation in urban labour market. However,
privatization has changed the employment situation in this occupation over last one decade or so. So far the sanitary work remained the responsibility of the state and the local bodies who in turn employed only Bhangis for the job and the areas not under their jurisdiction remained under the control of the scavengers through the customary rights system. The local bodies where most of the scavengers were absorbed earlier are not making most of them permanent now. There are restrictions on the Warasdar system of employment.

Similarly the Corporation is also moving towards private contract system where private contractors from other caste groups (mostly from upper castes and other Dalit groups) are entering the job market. Nowadays even government hospitals like Vadilal and Civil and other semi-government institutions are giving sanitary work to the private contractors. Secondly, the private contract system for cleaning and scavenging has increased over the years in the city, especially in ever growing residential and commercial complexes.

This has been perceived by the scavengers in the city as a major threat to their employment opportunities. Kanjibhai living in Narayanpura Harijan Vas, who has retired from AMC as sweeper now described the situation as follows:

More and more people of our community are getting unemployed. This trend has been increasing since last ten years or so. The Corporation going in for private contract system is not keen on providing permanent employment to scavengers. On the other hand, there is no security of the job as well the payment in private contract system. We will be left without any secured employment and the future is going to be difficult for our young generation.

Although, the officer in charge of Health department in AMC clarified that the Corporation is considering a proposal to go in for privatization of Safaikam in some areas under its jurisdiction, however it has not materialized. The proposal was opposed by insiders as well as by other political parties. According to Minesh Vaghela, the ex-Corporator and an advocate, the proposal under consideration is an illegal approach by a legal body. That routine mandatory work should not be contracted is an act in the constitution. This is the hidden agenda of the Corporation to eliminate the Safaikamdars in next 10 to 15 years; they will do away with Safaikamdars area by area. Once the contract

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23 Night sweeping has been introduced in areas with intense commercial activity. This has been contracted out on a part time labour contract. Night cleaning has been contracted out also in areas where Vendors are found in large numbers (from Website AMC).
system takes over then the Safai kamdars will be a helpless lot without any alternatives. They have no education and no skills to enter any other non-caste-based and higher-level occupations.

Similarly, the practice of untouchability and caste system will make it extremely difficult to get any work in corporate sector. On the other hand, huge money is involved in private contact system and the sanitary sub-inspectors are in hand and gloves with private contractors, who are/will be from upper castes. Harishbhai, the general secretary of the Union says,

Nowadays, the Corporation has systematic plans to weaken the Safai kamdars. They are moving towards private contract system. The privatization of Safai kam is already underway. Recently they have taken the initiative to implement the private contract system in two areas, i.e. Kalupur to Naroda road and Vatva area. We have opposed the contract system given to private organizations. The authority in the Corporation has promised us that they will soon stop the trial operation. Their idea is to begin the contract system along with the regular workers and slowly remove them from the job. All the workers will be Bhangis but the contractors will be someone else. So it will be more exploitation of the workers.

Manubhai Solanki, residing in a housing society is employed in railways as a sweeper; his grandfather and father were the employees of railways in Sabarmati area. He says that ‘getting employed as sweepers in railways was easy a few years ago. Now it has become extremely difficult’. He gives a few reasons for this change. The Warasdar employment has become extremely difficult – almost removed in railways. The railway authority has stopped employing more sweepers resulting in overloading of the work on the existing staff. In some departments of railways, toilet cleaning is already entrusted to private contractors. A number of people from other communities like Vankars, Thakors and Marwadis have entered this occupation. They do not hesitate to do this work nowadays. The person seeking an appointment a Safai kamdar in railways requires 8th standard pass, which was not the case earlier.

A number of semi-government or government aided institutions e.g. Indian Space Research Organization (ISRO) has shifted to privatization of sanitary work. Ishwarbhai who worked in ISRO says,

Since year 2000 they have stopped the Warasdar system of employment. They have shifted to private contractors. The person in charge gets his share from the private contractor and the private
contractor gets his contract in the institute. Many of those who were permanent Safaikamdars are being released from their duties. They often give the reason that they are not regular, they do not do good job. Now rules have changed even for those who are still working; twice they have to punch the entry card.

**Warasdar employment (compensatory appointment)**

The occupation of scavenging in traditional Indian rural society was more an occupation of household rather than an individual. The traditional jajmani relations continued the practice by the head of the household handling down the work to his son or other members of the household. As explained earlier, the 'gharaki' system of employment gave scavengers customary rights over a particular area of work (a location). In urban areas a street or a residential locality remained a 'gharaki' of a household for generations. Thus, continuity of the occupation of scavenging in the household was maintained. The municipality and other local bodies followed the similar system of compensatory appointment in the occupation of scavenging.

Compensatory appointment is a system wherein, when a permanent employee of the AMC ceases to work for a specific cause, the respective department appoints another suitable member of the same family for the job. The beneficiary may be his or her heir or close family member. Thus, the recipient of the compensatory employment is called Warasdar (successor or heir)\(^{24}\). For the families among whom there was someone employed in organized sector, the compensatory appointment system provided security and guarantee that someone else from the family will find employment in the same job.

At present, among the sampled respondents those households that have someone working as scavengers, 71 per cent (199) of them have at least a member of their family as a permanent scavenger employed in organized sector; and 50 per cent of them (100) have got this employment through the privilege of inheritance. However, 29 per cent of the households do not have any member of their family working as a permanent employee as a scavenger, hence no privilege of employment through the compensatory appointment.

\(^{24}\) For detail account of changes in the system over the years see Shinoda Takashi, 1995.
The data makes a point that the organized sector has certainly provided permanent employment to a number of families and has continued giving security and guarantee of the same, not by their qualifications or other merits but by compensatory appointment as they belong to scavenger family of Bhangi community.

The Corporation had passed a resolution in 1987 to grant heritance rights (Warasdar system) to the siblings of those retiring as sweepers and scavengers in Corporation. However, it has become extremely difficult in recent years to get a Warasdar employment due to policy change. A few years ago the Corporation instead of giving permanent employment to the heir of an employee began engaging the member from the family on temporary basis with a consolidated salary of Rs. 2,500 till he or she is made permanent. They are kept on probation period for two years, within which they can be suspended. If they prove themselves capable then permanent status may be granted to them. Quite often many of them have been suspended from duty within the probation period.

Secondly, a rule of requiring a certificate to show that the employed person is unfit so that his/her heir can get the job made the procedure extremely difficult and expensive. A number of agents (middlemen) exploited the situation to make a good business. Some of the agents charge Rs. 25,000 to 30,000 to complete the procedure of getting a medical unfit-certificate.

Kantibhai a physically challenged person working as a sweeper in AMC gives the account of how he got the job through the Warasdar system of employment.

My mother was working as Safaikamdar in AMC. When she was 55 year old we applied for Warasdar employment for me. For that she had to apply and obtain unfit certification. There was one person in our quarters who used to do such work. I asked him to help me out. My mother remained at home for almost a year without work to show that she is unfit to do the work. But this person couldn’t move our application. Finally we got unfit medical certificate from Vadilal hospital, a AMC run municipal hospitals for which we had to pay Rs. 10,000 to the doctor from Vadilal. Then I applied for Warasdar job in AMC with the unfit certificate of my mother. That took another

25 The latest amendment is made to this provision, which says that ‘once a sweeper reaches the age of 55 he/she can submit his resignation and one of his or her heir would be eligible for the same job without submitting any certificate indicating his or her unfitness’.

26 Henceforth, * would indicate the change of name of the respondent.
six months. So my mother was away from work for almost more than a year and half. But she got salary for all the pending leaves.

When the person who was helping us couldn’t do much, I took all the papers from him and then approached the Union to get my file moving. My file was lying down on some table in the Corporation. Finally the Union was able to find and get the work done. I paid rupees 10,000 to them for doing the work. I did spend a good amount of money on traveling and Xeroxing the documents, etc. But I got the Warasdar job and it is permanent. My mother paid all the expenses from the amount she got as her gratuity and provident fund. Now my mother has gone back to our village. She comes on 11th of every month to collect her pension.

Nevertheless, all do not recommend the Warasdar system of employment as they see a negative impact of it on the community. Madhubhai Parmar says,

The progress of the community has remained stagnant because the Bhangis are not able to see other alternatives beyond Safaikam. Young people do not want to continue education and parents do not want to educate their children. They think that they will do without education as the job is anyway secured. This security of job, at least to one person in the household has led many families not to look for alternatives in other fields as well.

Again, one finds a strong opposition and resentment, especially among those who work as Safaikamdars towards the suggestion of some members of the community to stop the Warasdar system in organized sector.

Mahendrabhai expresses his quest for a better job than the Warasdar but the ground realities experienced by him are different. He narrates his experience,

They see our birth certificate and they know that we are Bhangis. By our name itself they dislike us (amara namthtij aruchi jagig jay). I have finished my T.Y.B.A (fail) and I have given interviews for clerical job at two places, one in a Bank and another in Railways. But they did not select me. Finally, last year after the demise of my mother I have applied for the Warasdar’ place in AMC. My mother was working in railways as sweepers. So I hope to get a job in her place. I had to give written exams (focused on general knowledge). If I get though, then I may get better job otherwise I will get sweeper’s job, what my mother was doing. All these years, I have been doing work of replacement (badali) in the Corporation.

**Exclusions from higher posts**

As mentioned in the structure of the sanitary work in organized sector all lower level positions below the SSI, i.e. of mukadam and Safaikamdars are filled by persons
from Bhangi community. On the other hand, all higher level posts that of SSI and above are out of reach of the Bhangis. Although, there are eligible persons, qualified for the post of SSI, they work as ordinary Safaikamdars. The post of SSI requires specific qualifications such as Sanitary Inspector Diploma (SI) and Local Self Government Diploma (LSGD). However, there are some seats reserved for Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes. Members of higher Dalit groups have occupied most of the jobs reserved for Scheduled Caste category.

The two instances mentioned below represent a large number of respondents who say that it is extremely difficult to get promoted to higher positions as sanitary worker because of Warasdar privilege or because of caste. These instances also point out the discrimination experienced by the scavengers belonging to the caste of Bhangis. Although qualified and eligible, many of them remain in lower levels of employment for years. The caste factor once again plays important role as those belonging to higher castes either get higher posts or get promoted to higher positions.

Mukeshbhai from Gomtipur said,

I have completed my second year of B.Com. Then I completed the Sanitary Inspector Diploma (SI) and Local Self Government Diploma (LSGD). I gave interview twice. I did not get the job. In the first interview given at Jamnagar a Vankar was selected and in the second interview given at Vadilal hospital in Ahmedabad a tribal boy was selected. Are we to do only Safaikam? Since last five years I am doing sweepers work in spite of being educated and trained.

Lataben* employed in the ‘Bhikshuk Gruh’ in Odhav run by the Samaj Suraksha Department of the state government says the following,

I am working at the same place for the last 27 years and now just a few years away from my retirement. I have not got a single promotion. There is a government regulation (GR) stating a promotion after ten years. In many government hospitals women from Vankar and Chamar community have been employed as ward servers (Aayas) and the Bhangi women as sweepers (mehtarani). Normally the promotion is given for class IV employees with a different designation such as “Aaaya”, “female guard” and then “peon”. I was employed as a sweeper in the institute. My application was not accepted; they kept on postponing.

But I know for sure a number of members from Vankar and Chamar castes who were appointed as sweepers (their names were in sweepers register) got promotion even before the completion of ten years time period. They have been promoted to the post of female guards and peons. There are at
least ten cases of such type. Why then the rule of ten years is only for Bhangis? They employ high caste people in sweeping work but no body does the work. We have to do the work. However, they soon get promotion and move ahead; we remain where we are.

Scavenging and other castes

In recent years, especially in urban areas, members of the Bhangi community say that they encounter difficulty in finding scavenging work because people from other caste groups have begun to do scavenging jobs on which they had complete monopoly in the past. However, this does not seem to be entirely true. All sweepers and scavengers working in Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and other local bodies belong to Bhangi community. The authority in AMC confirmed this information.

When asked if there is any other caste group member working as sweeper in AMC, the officer denied the presence of a non-Bhangi sweeper on pay roll or on register in the Corporation. In AMC there is no recruitment policy (since 1979) in sweeping and cleaning other than the Warasdar system of appointing the workers, for which only the members of the Bhangi community are eligible. There is no possibility for others to come in.

There are a few workers from other caste groups in manhole and refuge departments of the AMC. It is reported that they are pushed through the influence of the officers in the department. This information was crosschecked with trade union leaders and workers of the departments. Around 30 to 40 workers belonging to other Dalit groups are employed in manhole department and around 7 Muslims are working in refuge department. These men from other caste groups do not engage themselves in actual work but they are on pay roll and draw their salary. The actual work is done by the Bhangis. Often they just sign in the register and pay some extra money to other Bhangis to do the work.

On the other hand, inflow of the members of the other caste groups in the occupation of scavenging is mainly found in informal sector, especially in private hospitals, dispensaries, offices and institutions. They could be distinguished as cleaners. The “cleaners” are employed for cleaning and mopping of the residential complexes, private bungalows, and in some places they also work as office attendants. These cleaners do not engage in toilet cleaning within the same complexes. They would not easily do
sweeping and scavenging work on the road or anywhere outside as it is the matter of status and social prestige. They are not called *Safai-karmachari*. Most of them come from higher Dalit communities like *Vankars, Rohits* and other backwards castes like *Vaghris* and *Rabaris*.

Nearly 17 per cent (44) respondents perceive that other caste people getting in this occupation is one of the reasons why they are being pushed out from the jobs. The members of the Bhangi community perceive the process of other caste persons engaging in sanitary work as a factor for further marginalizing them in urban economy.

1. It is a fact that a small number in organized sector and much larger in informal sector (of which we do not have the numbers) there are persons belonging to other castes groups employed or engaged in sanitation works in the city. It is documented that only the ex-untouchable caste groups, especially the Bhangis, traditionally carried out these works. The occupational change does point towards 'secularization' of the traditional caste based occupation in urban area. There can be many reasons for such change. However the changing nature of urban economy i.e. in-formalization of the labour and the problem of unemployment are certainly the contributing factors. In absence of employment opportunities, the unemployed poor do not follow the traditional caste restrictions or norms and get employed in any job that provides them livelihood.

2. The data also points to another important contribution made by the urban labour market in occupation of scavenging by distinguishing one activity from the other such as scavenging, cleaning public toilets, sweeping roads, cleaning houses and offices, etc. (based on the definition of *Safai-karmachari* Act, this study has avoided making such distinctions and has put all activities related to sanitary work under scavenging). The general perception of the urban labour market is that sanitary activities such as cleaning houses and offices, interior sweeping and cleaning private toilets such as in hospitals are more secular (not restricted to a particular caste) activities and largely separated from those traditional scavenging activities like carrying night soil, cleaning nuisance spots and cleaning public toilets, manhole cleaning etc.
Thus, these perceptions have led other caste group persons to take up to sanitary activities of the first type and distance themselves from the traditional scavenging activities. In organized as well as in informal sector the traditional scavenging works are entrusted to scavengers from Bhangi community. This has further marginalized them in degrading occupations. Urbanization instead of bringing scavengers to other occupations in open urban labour market, has further limited them in the so-called traditional caste occupation.

3. The city life might give an impression that association of a caste with a particular traditional occupation is no more. However, it is not true when it comes to association of Bhangis with the occupation of scavenging. A number of examples of such distinguishing categories of urban labour market in the occupation of scavenging not only confirm the perception of civil society about the caste and occupation but also indicate the tacit support of the state.

The Corporation and other local bodies do not have open recruitment for employing scavengers. They are mostly employed on the basis of Warasdar system and only from Bhangi community. Secondly, the scavengers in the sanitary structure of the Corporation are all from Bhangi community who are engaged in traditional scavenging activities mentioned above. Thirdly, a number of private contractors, i.e. SEWA employ a number of Bhangi women in their team of sanitary workers specifically to clean the toilets, which 'women of other higher Dalit groups would not do'.

Corruption and cheating

A number of instances described by the respondents at various levels indicate a line of financial malpractices in local bodies by different ‘agents’ from top to bottom. Another common observation made by the respondents is that “it is in the system, all know about it”. The ‘agents’ are not only from outside but also from the scavengers themselves.

Mostly their own people cheat the Safaikamdars in the entire system. The mukadam is a very powerful person. As some say, he is almost like “chief minister’s” status for an ordinary Safaikamdar. He has total control over the workers. His assistance
(pavdawala) has also control over the workers. They rarely do the work of Safai. One of the most common practices of cheating mentioned is the “riti pratha” (It has become a tradition therefore known as pratha).

The practice of “riti pratha” is followed where a Safaikamdar has to give certain amount of money to the mukadam every month. He grants certain favours and leverages to the worker such as allowing to come late on duty, just signing in the register and going home, not coming in for the afternoon session, going home early in the evening. This practice is quite common among municipal Safaikamdars. They pay money because they take leverages. In such situation women are the most victimized. They are given all sorts of additional and difficult work.

Another person who cheats the worker is the bill clerk. Once the sub-inspector in the muster station sanctions the salary slip, the worker goes to account office to collect the salary. The bill clerk has his cut from the salary every month. On some occasions when a Safaikamdar takes loan from the Corporation the bill clerk takes his cut, while giving the provident fund the bill clerk takes his share. He also plays an important role with Union members. The bill clerk cuts the contribution of each worker who is a member of the Union from his salary. He is well connected with the private moneylenders from whom Safaikamdars borrow money. Every month the bill clerk will cut the moneylender’s installment from their salary itself. He gets his commission from the moneylender as well. Quite often the Safaikamdar keeps his bank passbook and pension book as mortgage with bill clerk or moneylenders as the loan guarantee.

There are others like the Union, Credit Cooperative Bank, officers at higher levels who grant pension and gratuity to Safaikamdars, the Welfare Labour Officer (WLO) in the Corporation who certifies for job, the middleman at various levels, who are referred to as the agents of financial exploitation of Safaikamdars. “The Safaikamdar never comes home with his total salary or amount of any benefit he receives” says Puroshttam Macwana who handles a number of legal cases of Safaikamdars in the city.

Keshavbhai* who works in AMC as sweeper says the following about the riti pratha:
It is quite common. Many people give money to *mukadam* and to the bill clerk to do all sorts of adjustments. In every salary they get rupees 50-100 as their share so that we do not have any trouble. Sometime when a person wants to go home for a long leave he informs the bill clerk in the main office. He is the one who actually makes our salary statement and the payment. So his register is the final. Every muster station and local supervisor sends him the muster registers to count the leave. He gets the official information of each one’s working days. But he adjusts as per the needs. However, he gets his commission from our salary.

I am working in old city ward. Every morning I go to the muster station to sign and then again in the afternoon. My working area (beat) is fixed. But I have kept a person to work on my place. He is unemployed so I give him Rs. 400 to do the work that I am supposed to do. My *mukadam* and the sanitary sub-inspector (SSI) know about it. I pay them some money (*riti pratha*) every month so they do not say anything. The work is done so they should have no problem. I get Rs. 4,500 in hand after all the deductions in the office.

When the issue of corruption and cheating of the workers was brought up for discussion, the authority viz. the officials in Corporation and the Union leaders had different points of view. However, all of them accept the fact that the *Safaikamdars* have been systematically “used” and cheated by various forces for their personal gains and due to various factors the workers fall into their traps.

The officers in the sanitation departments recognize the tremendous contribution of the *Safaikamdars* in maintaining health, hygiene and the general environment of the city. They assert that the AMC has soft corner for *Safaikamdars* employed in various departments and provide many financial and other benefits as per the directions given by the Supreme Court and other Commissions. But Unions have projected them as enemies of the Safaikamdars. The Union does not like some of the reform policies and steps taken by AMC in improving the conditions of *Safaikamdars*, i.e. scrapping the need of unfit certificate to get *Warasdar* job, the direct payment by cheque to its workers, the opening of the branch of ICICR bank for its workers, etc because in all the actual loser is the Union.

On the other, the Union leaders attribute the reasons for worker’s exploitation to the administration and its set up. They say the financial malpractices are due to administrative carelessness. When a worker is in a financial crisis he can get assistance only from three sources 1) loan 2) credit 3) advance money from Employer’s Provident Fund. But he does not get these facilities and if he gets, never on time. In such situation a
worker in need goes to moneylender and takes loan at the high interest rates. This is how a Safaikamdar remains in debt whole of his life.

Marginalization of Scavengers in Informal Sector

Part time employment

One of the most common phenomena among those working in informal sector as scavengers is the part time employment. A large number of scavengers engaged in informal sector are part timers. As their job demands only the completion of the task assigned to them, they are hired only for a few hours of the day. There is neither a permanent nor a full time employment. In such situation scavengers working in informal sector engage themselves in more than one job. They move from one place to another during the day attending to different jobs.

Parulben for example works at three different places—in a shopping center in the morning from 7 am to 10 am, at a nearby police station in the evening from 4 pm to 6 pm and remaining time she works with her husband who takes contract of cleaning party plots. It is observed that a number of women who work regularly but on part time basis in informal sector as scavengers do not consider it as an employment. They say that it is not full-time or permanent work. They are paid partly in cash and partly in kind.

Uncertainty of employment

The sweepers working in informal sector are not sure how long their employment under a particular labour contractor would last. Any housing society would discontinue the contract if not happy with the work of a particular labour contractor. This naturally leaves labourers in insecurity, as the new contractors would bring in his labourers leaving the old one to fetch for themselves. Similarly, the “hire and fire” principle being practiced by the labour contractors as per their wishes in order to improve the system does not guarantee the continuity in job for too long.

Kanubhai Parmar, a migrant from Dholka Taluka has been working as private sweeper since last fifteen years that he has been in the city. A year ago he found a job in
Delhi Public School, Ahmedabad as temporary sweeper. He worked in the school for six months or so. He was working from morning 6.30 am to 2.30 in the afternoon and was paid Rs. 3,000 as consolidated salary per month. Then the school entrusted the sweeping operation to a private contactor from outside. The sweepers of the school were given an option either to join the private contractor with his conditions or to leave the school after taking their dues. The private contractor was ready to employ all sweepers working earlier in the school with the conditions that their consolidated salary would be Rs. 1,800 per month, and the timing of the work would be from 6.30 am till 4.30 in the afternoon.

The sweepers did not agree with the conditions of the new contractor and registered their complaint to the management of the school. But their request was denied and they were asked to take their dues from the school and leave. They further requested the management to consider their case but when they realized nothing more could be done they gave their resignation to the school management and collected due amount from the school and left the place. The new contractor employed other set of workers in the school. Now Kanubhai is working as private sweeper in housing societies with Rs. 1,200 salary per month.

Karsanbhai, his neighbour standing nearby said,

Those of us working as private sweepers are spread out all across the city and there is no unity among us. We are not in position to assert ourselves against the injustice done to us, as we are not organized. We are paid small amount of wages and that too not regular. We cannot even fight back with private employers otherwise they will throw us out of our job.

**Underage employment (child labour)**

During the fieldwork as I sat in front of a house in a slum at the outskirts of the city I asked a young girl if she was going to school. Her name was Jaya. She replied, “No, I do not go to school. I go to sweep”. Jaya is just eight years old. As her mother came out and a further inquiry revealed that she was staying back in the village with her grandparents and was studying in 2nd standard. This year she came to stay with her parents. She has discontinued her studies. She goes along with her mother to help her.

Her mother who works as a private scavenger in nearby residential localities at the outskirts of the city says,
She is good at work. She sweeps and mops the staircases. She manages one entire staircase by herself. This is a good training for her. Our children are being trained from childhood so that in future they do not have problem with the work. She is going to do this work only.

Underage employment (child labour) is found common in informal sector, especially among those families who undertake smaller contracts of cleaning the residential complexes. Although the exact number of such cases is not known, the data on education (see chapter III - Profile of the respondents) do indicate that a large number of Bhangi children are dropouts. They discontinue schooling and begin to work at early age. This trend is also confirmed by the data on employment, which shows a number of children (not falling in work force, below the age of 19) being employed or earning livelihood.

Suresh is another young boy of fourteen years of age working as sweeper along with his parents in a residential complex as a member of a team of labourers working under a labour contractor from the community itself. He narrates the following:

Every morning I cycle for fifteen to twenty minutes to reach the workplace. We have to reach by 8 in the morning. Our supervisor takes attendance everyday. We work till 4 in the evening. We are five-member team looking after the cleaning of the entire residential complex known as tower (other members of the team are his parents and two other close relatives). We carry our lunch with us and all five of us eat together in the complex itself. Since I am young I have been given only parking plot of one tower as my responsibility of cleaning but I am paid Rs. 200 less than the others. They are paid Rs. 1,200 and have two towers each to clean. Every morning first we clean the entire place and then there is not much work. However, I cannot sit when supervisor is around. We are allowed to take a weekly off during the week. If we do not take the day off the contractor pays us extra wages for the day. If we take an extra day off then he brings someone else and cuts our wages.

From my childhood I have seen my parents working hard to earn money. I studied up-to 5th standard and then discontinued my schooling. It was my own decision to discontinue. We have borrowed a big amount of money for the marriage of my uncle and my father has to repay the amount. Now we have already repaid good amount and it will take another six months to repay the loan. My parents are telling me to go to school now, but I do not want to go. I wanted to educate myself hoping that I

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Another important point is raised by the data that 2.4 per cent of the total population (162) who do not come in the age group of potential workforce (19 - 60) is found earning livelihood by finding some employment (the total working population in data is 2114 and the employed persons in potential workforce is 1952). This does indicate towards an economic situation where a person below age of 19 and / or above 60 needs to find some work for his livelihood! A number of instances have been observed that children have been taken along by parents to assist in private sanitary work and a number of older children (above 15 years) have been doing private sanitary works with labour contractors or going for rag picking with their parents. Thus children are agents of economic help in economically poor families.
would get some good job other than sweeping. Many of our people who are educated do not find other jobs; sweeping is anyway there for us.

**Weakening bargaining power**

The inflow of migrants belonging to the Bhangi community to the city is continuously increasing. A large number of them, not being absorbed in other occupations fall back on the traditional occupation of scavenging. The increase in the number of labourers has reduced the bargaining power of the scavengers in informal sector.

Bhikabhai who presently does some part time scavenging work says,

A few years ago I could earn Rs. 1,500 - 2,000 per month by doing private gutter cleaning. I could demand 50 to 100 rupees easily. But nowadays it has become difficult. If I demand the same charges, they say, ‘why do you charge so high, there are other people ready to do the same work for Rs. 25 to 30’? It is true; there are people ready to take up the job at lower charges. There are so many of our young people from rural areas who have come to the city and have no jobs. I do not earn the same as I was earning a few years ago.

A number of respondents, especially those living in the slums at the peripheries are of the opinion that there is less work and more manpower. Rameshbhai, who resides in a slum on the western bank of the river and does private scavenging has the following to say,

The inflow of migrants has increased in recent years and they are mostly concentrated in the new and extended part of the city. The contactors are taking advantage of the situation and exploit the cheap labour available. Some of them ask for bribe to hire a person for longer period with them. One who offers more money gets the job. There are a lot of private contactors in this occupation. It is true that in recent years private societies have increased too. In such situation knowing someone from nearby housing society is very helpful to get the work. If I know someone, he or she offers the work and with that contact I get further cleaning work in that society or other places.

**Losing customary rights**

The private contract system has led to another important consequence for the scavengers working in informal sector. Many of the scavengers engaged in this sector were tied down to particular housing localities with traditional customary rights (gharaki) system. Now with the coming of the private contractors in housing societies the customary rights have suddenly being taken away from the sweepers as they are thrown out of the areas. A private contractor employs any scavenger he wishes, thus, those who worked in
that area earlier on the basis of gharaki have no power or rights to enter the area. These sweepers in a sense are now displaced from their traditional rights. They not only lose the employment but also the right to ask for the leftover food in the evening.

THE CUSTOMARY RIGHTS OF THE BHANGIS

The N.R. Malkani committee on customary rights of scavengers (1961) affirmed that a system of customary (jajmani) continues in a number of states. That includes: a) exclusive rights of certain scavenger families to clean latrines in specified household and localities, and b) the right to sell, mortgage or transfer as gifts the task of disposal of night soil and other rubbish collected by the scavengers of the respective area.

The committee found that where scavenging is not municipalized and latrines are cleaned privately, one particular scavenger acquires hereditary right to clean such latrines as against another scavenger, by a tacit understanding. A customary relationship also develops with the householder and the scavenger receives payments in some form or the other. In small town he is generally paid in kind (a daily roti) and some perquisites like food or clothes, etc. on some special occasions such as births, marriages, and deaths. Often in bigger towns he is also paid partially in cash by each family served by him and in cities he is generally paid only in cash. The householders are unable to change the scavengers when desired, but a scavenger may enter into a deal with another on payment of an amount according to the status of the household.

Such customary rights are called “gharaki” in Gujarat as they are also known by specific names like jagirdari, dastoori, and virat in northern India (Sharma 1995). The Bharve Committee Report (1949) contains the similar descriptions of the customary (gharaki) rights. In Gujarat, where such rights were widespread, 28 private bodies recognized hereditary rights to the cleaning of latrines.

Although over the years, many of the scavengers were employed in organized sector, a large number of them continued working in private residential areas. It is said that

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28 Among the 63 local bodies in Gujarat, which the Barve committee contacted, only 30 admitted the existence of customary rights. A member of the committee, B.U. Waghela, who was very knowledgeable about customary rights, declared that customary rights were distributed widely in all cities in Gujarat excluding Surat (Barve Committee Report: 1949: 32-33).
the practice *gharaki* (employment) was then made official. The Corporation had a scheme in which, each of them was allocated certain areas to do their work of sweeping i.e. that area is allocated permanently to them (see Franco 2004). In some sense the traditional customary practice took official form in urban area.

One of the most visible and commonly practiced aspects of the customary rights was the asking for left-over food from the families where the scavengers worked during the day. The following details provide some insights into its functioning and form it has taken in the urban area of Ahmedabad.

**The Practice of *Valu Mangvu***

In Gujarat the evening meal is normally known as *Valu. Mangvu* means to beg, to ask for. Asking for leftover food in the evening is a traditional practice among the Bhangis in villages as well as in cities. The system of collecting food in the evening from various upper caste houses has been in force in the Bhangi community from earlier times.

Late evenings, around the time one is about to finish dinner, a person from the scavenger community, mostly a woman and sometimes accompanied by a child, enters the street (the locality where one has the regular duty of cleaning the area) carrying utensils. She would then shout with maximum humility, "*Valu aljo Maa Baap*" which means ‘mother and father’ (masters) be kind to give dinner’. After shouting a number of times they would stand at a central place and wait for household members to respond with whatever they would give.

The members of the upper caste households, mostly women and children come out with left-over food and empty the food from a little distance into the utensils held by the woman and the child (making sure neither of them touches each other or the utensils). They mostly carry two utensils, one for solid food and the other for liquid. They hang on to the area for some time till they realize that no more food shall come forth then walk away to their house for dinner. Normally three kinds of food are given to them. Fresh leftover but not consumed; fresh but consumed leftover in the plate and the leftover from

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29 This kinship terminology is retained by Bhangis especially those practicing *gharaki* as part of the practice of *jajmani* system. They say that *jajmans*, who are higher castes should receive the same respect as mother and father.
the afternoon. In the practice of *Valu mangvu* there is no choice of what food should be accepted and not accepted. Everything that is given is generously accepted and humbly acknowledged “lao Maa Baap”, which means give us kind masters (see also Macwan 1998; 2001).

The food collected from the upper castes is never consumed at the house of the giver. It is normally brought home. Once they come home, all the members of the family come together and have their dinner. Since they collect all sorts of food given only in two utensils (solid and liquid) it is all mixed up. There is a tale that connects the practice of *Valu mangvu* and the way of eating with their ancestor Rushi Valmiki of *Mahabharata*.

Once Yudisthira attempted to perform the *Ashwamedha Yagna*. They had vowed that not a single person in their territory would remain without food. But after the ritual eating, the ritual bell (*Ashwameghno ghant*) did not ring on its own accord, thereby indicating that the rites had not been followed to the divinities’ satisfaction. Sahdev (trikal ynani) found out that the maharushi Valmiki was not invited. Finally when he was brought in, Draupadi served him thirty-two dishes (*batris vангис*) prepared for the occasion. He mixed all the food together, seeing which Draupadi was surprised and said to herself, “What sort of rushi is he; he does not know how to eat and appreciate food?” Knowing well what was going on in the mind of Draupadi, the rushi said, “lady, I know I have mixed all thirty two dishes you have served, but there is no salt in some dishes”.

The custom of collecting food from upper castes for a service rendered to them is an activity that has gone for generations (Macwan 2001). However, the urban living has brought some changes in the practice as well as in the attitudes of the members of the community towards the custom.

The inquiry into this aspect reveals that some of the members of the community do not follow the practice and some follow. On the other hand, there are respondents who

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30 There is a religious belief among Bhangis that if the upper castes give food to a Bhangi and if he eats that food in the house of the upper caste then the upper caste will get spiritual gain (*Puniya*). It is said that a sensible Bhangi will not eat at the upper caste house rather carry the food home and eat.

31 Vijay Prasad (2000: 73) narrates the same tale in which he mentions “Draupadi momentarily marked him as dalit”.

32 Ramjibhai, one of the respondents who narrated the tale said, “It is not begging food. This is the tradition given to us by our Rushi. We eat the same way as he had eaten, mixing all the varieties of food given to us. However it is said, “Dhedne dhunta na avade ane Bhangiyane khata na avade” A Dhed (*Vankar*) will never do proper puja, and a Bhangi will not eat properly. A Bhangi will always mix the food together and will find some fault even with the best food served”.

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used to follow have given up the practice. Based on this the respondents can be categorized into three groups.

Table: 5.4 – Categories of households based on the practice of Valu mangvu

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Households that follow the practice Vadu Mangvu now</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>50.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Households that do not practice Vadu mangvu now but did follow earlier</td>
<td>81</td>
<td>27.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Households that did not practice Vadu mangvu at all</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>22.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td><strong>300</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1) **Households that follow the practice of Valu Mangvu**

There are nearly 51 per cent of the respondents (152) in whose household the practice is being followed now. Some of the members of the family go to collect left over food in the evening. The respondent gave three main reasons for continuing the practice. As many as 43 per cent (66), of them gave “poor economic conditions, large size of the family, income not sufficient”. On the other hand, 38 per cent of them (58) said, “Valu mangvu has been our tradition from generations” so they continue doing the same even now. Similarly, 18 per cent of them (28) said, “As private scavengers Valu mangvu is our right (gharaki)”.

2) **Households that do not practice Valu mangvu now but did follow earlier**

As many as 27 per cent of the respondents (81) said that nowadays no one from the household goes to collect left over food in the evening although the household followed the practice earlier. This group of respondents has given up the practice of asking the left over food now for various reasons. Nearly 37 per cent of them (30) had someone from the family working as a private scavenger earlier and so they had right to ask the left-over food. This clearly indicates what has been mentioned that the privatization of scavenging work had some fallout for the practice of customary rights of scavengers.

As many as 16 per cent of them (13) said that the place of work is far away and it is costly to go to collect food in the evening; whereas 30 per cent of them (24) expressed that their economic conditions have improved so they do not depend on the left-over food. Some have said that they go for asking for left-over food according to the situation in the house - “Sometimes we go; sometimes we do not”. Similarly, 5 per cent of them attributed
the change to increasing education in the community. Many households where there are educated members do not go asking for left-over food.

3) Households that didn’t practice *Valu mangvu at all*

Little over 22 per cent of the respondents (67) said that their family did not practice *Valu* tradition in the city. Of them, 24 per cent (16) indicate that they have been engaged in better jobs and have better economic conditions and so never went to ask for left over food. However, nearly 63 per cent of them (42) pointed out that they have someone from the household working as scavenger or sweeper but not in private or places where *gharaki* tradition was being practice. So they have no place to ask for left over food. It is only small minority of 3 per cent (2) among them who believe that it is better to earn the bread than begging.

**Wider Ramifications of the Practice for the Community**

One of the major reasons for continuing the practice of asking left-over food is the poor economic conditions of many of the families; especially those migrants working in informal sector. Many respondents have mentioned that the income of the family is not sufficient to manage all the daily expenses as prices of essential commodities rise every now and then. They have no other alternatives but to go for asking left-over food at night which at least assures one meal of the day. Often, many of them prefer to ask for food rather than wages for their labour. Many, especially those who are economically poor and engaged in private scavenging, perceive the system as an economic benefit.

Basically they collect food in return for the services they provide to upper and middle castes. Such food is seen in the community as economic support. However, the custom of collecting leftover food has a profound socio-psychological impact on the community. Children accompany elders in the family when they go for *Valu*. The verbal and visual socialization, which the child goes through, does create an impact on his/her mind. These images are more powerful than any other formal socialization process’. The ideology of inferiority is transmitted in the processes by parents to children from early years (see Macwan 2001).
The upwardly mobile members among the community have different views about the practice, especially of its wider impact and ramifications on the community. "The basic reason for continuing this practice is that the family gets cooked food without much trouble. The women have to go through humiliation but men do not bother about it. The tradition of asking for left-over food kills self-respect", says S.A. Solanki.

Similarly, Kamalaben perceives the practice as a reason for community being domesticated and hesitates to assert itself. "Our caste people have fear of upper castes because of the social and economic structure. They are dependent on the upper castes for their existence. They do not assert against the upper castes because there is a sense of insecurity that they may not get work from the upper castes as well as the left over food."

Basic and economic securities are central to human development and growth. When and where it is not possible for a group or a community to provide such securities to themselves, it is the role of the state to provide social protection to the vulnerable people. In the present era of globalization and privatization the role of the state in providing the social security is changing and in fact diminishing. The data in this section on the recent processes of marginalization of the scavengers both in the organized as well as the informal sector of the economy and of the scavenger community in general point to the changing nature of the urban labour market and the failure of the state in providing social security network to the most vulnerable.

SCAVENGERS AND THE TRADE UNIONS

In Gujarat there has never been a powerful left trade union movement. The Congress trade unions or Majoor Mahajan Organizations occupied the field and now the BJP-sponsored Bharatiya Majoor Sangh (BMS) has substantial support. At present even these organized unions are disintegrating or are being weakened mainly because of increasing number of casual and contract workers. The trade union movement also continued for long under the influence of Gandhian ideology of peace, harmony and cooperation between capital and labour, and therefore never took a strong stand on any important socio-economic issue. The socialist and communist unions remained only marginal and peripheral and could not have any strong workers' movement (Patel 2002).
The trade unions, as a major pressure group of sweepers, played a very significant role in shaping the service and living conditions of the sweepers through negotiations with the authorities concerned. Nevertheless, two important points are very significant, 1) although trade unions emerged as a major institution for the municipal sweepers, their activities were confined to the improvement of service conditions and 2) those who took the initiative in the trade union activities were not sweepers themselves, but leaders from other communities. For the trade union leaders, always used the sweepers, the largest segment of municipal workers for mobilization activities (Shinoda 2002a).

It is also noted by NGOs working among the scavengers that the efforts made to organize the sweepers and scavengers have not yielded much result mainly due to two reasons, 1) they are reluctant about joining the workers association due to the fear of losing job in the Corporation. They say it is the only source they have and do not want to take any risk; and 2) the local or area level leaders of the sweepers and scavengers (belonging to the Bhangi caste) easily fall prey in the hands of Corporation officers and political leaders for selfish gains. In such situation, a movement or a protest does not take any concrete shape.

Sixty-four registered trade unions were functioning in the AMC in 1991. Five of them have a particular concern with bettering the employment, working and living conditions of sweepers. The Ahmedabad Municipal *Nokar Mandal* is one of the most active trade unions having largest membership of the scavengers.

Harishbhai, the general secretary of the Union who is also a member of the Bhangi community gives the following details.

In 1983 a big number of *Safaikamdars* shifted to *Nawkar Mandal* from *Majoor Mahajan*, the trade union started by Mahatma Gandhi. Till that time *Nawkar Mandal* was a trade union of general workers. Today it has 22,000 total life members and all 8,000 *Safaikamdars* are part of this union. Earlier the union used to collect annual membership fees (*lavajam*) of Rs. 30 but since last few years we have scrapped annual membership and have made life membership fees of Rs. 300.

Over the years, the *Nawkar Mandal* has created its own space and *Safaikamdars* have a big contribution in it. In 1991 the union made a compromise with the authority of the Corporation on the issue of *Warasdar* system. Prior to that, one could get *warasdar* employment only after the death of the person employed. But we manage to get our demand to employ head for head, i.e. one person could be employed in place of another in the family as one retires or resigns from his duties. It was a big achievement for *Safaikamdars*. We made another attempt during the 5th pay commission
to get maximum benefits to the members. We have taken up regularly the issues of workers like their provident fund, traveling long distances, etc.

Our procedure of approaching and handling a problem is simple. First when we have to address an issue we inform and give it in writing to the concerned authority on our letterhead. If they invite us for a meeting we discuss the matter. If there is no solution then we have the next stage of slogan shouting. If that does not bear results, then we give the red signal of Andolan (protest). Often we take out processions, and partial work blockade. If that does not work then we take recourse to the final weapon given by Ghandiji of non-violent strike (hadtal) and fast unto death. One of the biggest strikes (hadtal) took place in around 1992 on the issue of “advancing Diwali bonus”. The workers were not given advanced payment and the bonus during that year in order to celebrate the festival. When our demand was not granted, 35,000 workers went off the work for a day. The next day we were called on the table, discussion took place and payment with bonus was advanced.

Another big “Andolan” took place for the cause of Safaikamdars in November 2003. We did not intend to have an Andolan but when things went out of hand we had to take recourse to it. It was regarding the “carrying night soil on head”. One of the daily newspapers “Dainik Bhaskar” published a write up about such practice in the city of Ahmedabad. On the same day the director of SC-ST commission was present in the city. The Safaikamdars held a meeting with the District Collector on the issue of open latrine and the problem of carrying night soil. When the authority was pulled in for the practice, the deputy commissioner in charge of Western zone called in a number of women workers who seems to have been doing these work for inquiry.

Yes, the problem has not been solved. We have given the warning letter and are waiting for the response from the authority. They are making inquiries and yet have not called us for discussion. But the practice of carrying night soil cannot be solved easily till the authority looks into the problem. The population in the city is increasing at a rapid speed but the authority is not able to provide latrines. Lacis of people defecate in the open. Somebody has to clean that “shit”. There are a number of “nuisance spots” in the city where there is lack of toilets.

Finally, the general secretary of the Union responds to this pathetic state with a revolutionary hope.

The manhole workers and the workers cleaning the nuisance spots are the worst sufferers among sanitary workers. There is a step-motherly treatment to Safaikamdars from the authority. Why Safaikamdars do not get the same treatment as military personnel? Why cannot they be given wine permit like military men? Safaikamdars are as important as army. They take responsibility of protecting the city from health hazards. But we cannot call for a strike. So far there is no special strike for their cause. For any strike we have to give an advance notice 14 days before. But by that
time the authority declares the strike illegal under the Essential Services Maintenance Act. Once the Act is applied we cannot really go ahead with strike. Our hands are tied down as the Safaikam falls under this Act. But I believe it is the time preparing for a violent revolution. You cannot keep workers suppressed all the time. The stage is being prepared for violence. A revolution ("Krantि") will surely take place.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table: 5. 10 – Respondents’ awareness of Trade Union in the city</th>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Are you a member of the trade union working for scavengers in the city?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Is there any trade union of or for scavengers in the city?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Were there any morcha / strike, fighting for scavengers issue in the city during last 10 years?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of the total respondents, 36 per cent (109) have indicated that they are members of the trade union working for scavengers in the city. The data on the occupational category shows that nearly 46 per cent of the total respondents are working as scavengers in organized sector (see table 4.1). This could be interpreted that other than the AMC, other local bodies and public institutions of the organized sector in which scavengers are employed, either do not have trade union or the scavengers are not the members if there is one. As stated earlier, a large number of scavengers engaged in informal sector do not have trade unions attending them.

Nevertheless, 47 per cent (141) of the total respondents are aware that there are trade unions in the city working for the cause of the scavengers. The fact that there are trade unions in the city working for scavengers, little more than 20 per cent (61) of the total respondents saying ‘there is no trade union’ or ‘they do not know’, shows the level of awareness among the respondents as well as the level of intervention of trade unions in the day to day life of the scavengers in the city. This observation is further confirmed, where as many as 62 per cent (186) of the respondents said that there were no mobilization activities by trade unions fighting for scavengers over last ten years or they do not know of such activities.

33 The Essential Services Maintenance Act prohibits strikes in essential services such as sanitation and water supply, along with the railways, post and telegraph, etc.
Conclusion

Various committees and commissions appointed by the state and central governments are mostly concerned with the poor working conditions of the scavengers. The descriptions of these reports often raise question why scavengers are not giving up dirty and degrading occupation in modern times. Thus, policy recommendations dealt with improving their "pathetic" conditions and to rehabilitate them to some other occupations. The self-evident descriptions of marginalization of the scavengers in urban labour market in this study raise different set of questions. The state and its various agencies need to take into consideration seriously the "socio-economic security" of the vulnerable groups in our democratic society. Why do scavengers, the indispensable functionaries in our society, have been marginalized, in the past in rural economy and now in urban labour market, are more crucial questions to raise.

The informalization or the casualisation of the labour, well demonstrated in an extensive study on the workforce of the closed textile mills of Ahmedabad by Breman (2002; 2004) is amply proved by the data in this chapter. The unemployment, underemployment and casualisation of the workforce, especially among migrants and young generation of the community once again confirms that the Bhangis who had monopoly over the scavenging work in organized sector are losing hold over the occupation over last one decade or so. Employment in the organized sector has become a distant dream for a large majority of them who migrate to the city in search of livelihood.

Engagement of a number of Bhangis in rag picking for example (which they had never engaged in before coming to the city) is an indication of the marginalization process of the labour. 'In most cases, waste-picking is driven by unemployment and poverty' (Choudhary 2003). Informal waste collection accepts migrants and marginalized people who are 'unskilled' and are not capable of getting formal jobs. When found with no alternatives of employment the members of the Bhangi community have taken recourse to rag picking and other lower levels of jobs, which are socially rejected in urban labour market. The privatization of sanitary work and insertion of other caste people in this occupation has further increased the insecurity of employment among scavengers in urban labour market.
The caste factor plays a significant role in maintaining the scavengers as the most marginalized class of labour in the urban economy. The discrimination experienced by the scavengers either in the employment opportunities or in the promotion to higher positions point towards their being members of a marginalized caste group. In organized as well as in informal sector the traditional scavenging works are entrusted to scavengers from Bhangi community. This has further marginalized the Bhangis in degrading occupations. Urbanization, instead of bringing scavengers to other occupations in open urban labour market, has further limited them into traditional caste occupation.

Another important point revealed in the data is that the local authorities perceive scavengers as indispensable functionaries of the state. However, the differential treatments given to them indicate a social hierarchy of labour in the local bodies.

The scavengers belonging to the Bhangi caste are doubly marginalized in the urban labour market. The lower position in the caste hierarchy and the economic vulnerability combined together create multi-dimensional exclusion. Therefore, it is imperative to understand how caste plays an important role in socio-economic and political life of the scavengers, beyond the occupation.

The next section consisting of three chapters will deal with the caste of the scavengers. The social organization of the caste, its socio-political life in the city and the process of identity formation among its members will be the focus of the section.
SECTION III

CASTE OF THE SCAVENGERS

Chapter VI
THE CASTE AND THE COMMUNITY

Chapter VII
CITY AND THE SOCIAL LIFE OF CASTE

Chapter VIII
CITY AND THE POLITICAL LIFE OF CASTE

Chapter IX
MOBILITY AND IDENTITY FORMATION AMONG SCAVENGERS