

National Seminar on the Scourge of Scavenging: Revisiting the Question of Sanitation/Scavenging/Scavengers (08-10 November 2017)

Concept Note

India has been consistently critiqued, locally and globally, for its inability to ban the inhuman practice of manually cleaning human feces, otherwise popularly known as manual scavenging. Different stake-holders have consistently argued towards achieving clean and safe practices in sanitation, particularly with respect to the disposal of human waste. In order to do so, governments have set up committees such as the 1949 Barve Committee and programmes such as the Central Rural Sanitation programme to the contemporary Swachh Bharat campaign. The major findings of these committees has been that the scavenging system in India is a customary practice that, along with the social stigma attached to it, is carried forward from one generation to the next. It is in this context that attempts were later made to improve the working conditions of the sweepers and to remove the social stigma related to the occupation, thereby leading to the formation of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis towards the rehabilitation of scavengers. The committees and the programmes did not attain their goal towards abolishing manual scavenging. As a result, various civil society groups began arguing against the apathy faced by sanitary workers and campaigning for better working environment through books, documentaries, legal cases. If one NGO focused on the complete ban on manual scavenging, another would focus on introducing toilets that are cost effective. Adding to the already existing problem, financial liberalisation in India has further endangered the job security that scavengers earlier had. If earlier dignity of labour was the fight of scavengers, then after liberalisation even their basic survival was brought to question. With the contemporary resurgence of Dalit movements, the complete annihilation of caste once again became an articulated demand, one that could not be achieved without eradicating manual scavenging and the insanitary conditions within which scavengers are made to work.

Sub Theme

1. Histories, Sociologies and Anthropologies of Manual Scavenging
2. The Indian State and Scavenging
3. Scavenging and Media: Photography and Cinema
4. The Toilet in Popular and Monumental Architecture
5. The Economy and Ecology of Scavenging
6. Representations of Scavenging in Literature
7. Popular Struggles around Scavenging
8. Dr. B. R. Ambedkar and the Question of Manual Scavenging
9. Critiquing the Gandhian response to scavenging
10. Law and Scavenging

11. The role of NGOs

12. Scavenging and Scheduled Caste

A National seminar on 'The Scourge of Scavenging: Revisiting the Question of Sanitation/ Scavenging/Scavengers' was organized by IAS during 08-10 November 2017. Dr. Ravi Chandran, Fellow, IAS was the Convener of the seminar. The welcome address was given by Professor Vijay Shankar Varma, National Fellow, IAS. The Keynote address was given by Professor Bezawada Wilson.

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