

**Pitiful Fate**

**For the Lowest Caste,  
Clearing India's Toilets  
Remains Life's Work**

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JOURNAL

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**CHAUMU, India**-Each morning ten year old Nisha Tak unclogs sewers in the central Indian farming town by plunging her arms up to her elbows in human waste. Then she washes up and goes to school.

Her grandmother, the link to the higher-caste families whose excrement Nisha's untouchable clan has been tending to for generations, doesn't like the arrangement one bit.

"Why should she go to school when she can work more and make money for the family?" the old woman complains.

India is in a tug of war, pulled forward and back by what remains one of the most socially stratified societies on Earth. the practice of **untouchability** - that is, shunning all contact with people of the outcastes - was nominally outlawed after India became independent in 1947. In big cities, where everyone rubs shoulders to get by, caste distinctions are slowly fading.

But here in **rural** India, where about 70% of India's 950 million people still live, people remain, by and large, what their ancestors were - and that usually means fixed in **illiteracy** and poverty.

The lowliest of the low in India's ancient caste hierarchy are the *bhangis*, or sewage scavengers, so ostracized that not even the tanners and animal cremators-untouchables themselves-will go near them.

India's 700,000 scavengers live in slums earning pennies a day, moving the flow of human waste for a nation in which 650 million people still lack access to basic sanitation. As with most Indian work, the dirtiest jobs are done by women and young girls who still clean pit toilets by hand and carry the refuse in buckets on their heads.

"You never get used to it," young Nisha says.

Promised liberation by Mohandas "Mahatma" Gandhi, who made a point of disposing of his own waste himself. After independence, the Indian Constitution, imbued with Gandhian idealism, set aside 24% of all government jobs for "backward" castes, a quota that still exists.

India's economy has struggled over the years. In 1991, India ranked among the world's worst-off nations by nearly every social indicator. It's literacy rate has been stuck for years at 52% (39% for women). Half of India's 200 million children don't attend school. Plumbing, electricity, and health services are scarce.

**Pigs in Pools**

The large upper-caste government has been replaced by a coalition of regional and lower-caste parties that is vowing to spend heavily to help the poor. A record seven of 12 senior ministers in the new government come from lower castes. They came to power by attacking the upper castes. One member of Parliament says "The leaders of the lower castes today are inciting hatred and destroying the country's goodwill."

There remains much to hate. Here in the scavenger slum of Chaumu, a town of about 40,000 people in northeast India, the summer heat can top 115 degrees, yet only the pigs have a place to cool off. Summer is mosquito season; at which point nearly everyone in this untouchable colony

gets malaria.

The scavengers eke out a living in two ways: the modern way, cleaning sewers and streets for the city and the traditional way, handling high-caste excrement for hire.

Government work is preferred, if only for the gloves and wheelbarrows it provides. But the city, on orders from the debt-ridden state, hasn't hired new cleaners for months. So every morning, three generations of scavenger women lumber off to the same households their families have served for centuries. Whether they clean open sewers and pit toilets by hand or sweep outhouses with a broom, workers earn about 19 rupees a month-less than 30 cents-from each of the dozen or so households they regularly service. On good days, they are given food to take home and occasionally, some old clothes.

**Don't Touch the Children**

All the upper-caste employers in this town practice untouchability, the scavengers say. Entering a higher-caste home, for instance, would be unthinkable. To reach the toilets, special doors and passageways are provided for them, carefully shielded from the living quarters. At tea shops in town, most customers sip from glasses; scavengers are served tea in disposable clay cups. Merchants dispense grain and milk to them from spouts held high about the untouchables' jars, careful not even to graze them. When a scavenger bridegroom picks up his bride on their wedding day on the traditional horseback, he dismounts, in deference, when passing higher-caste homes.

Birth remains a life sentence to poverty. Though more scavenger children are getting some public education-boys usually-it hasn't helped much, they say. Mukeish Tak, the third person ever from this slum's 700 scavenger families to

attend college, says most higher caste students at school don't go near the handful of untouchable students, who stick to themselves. Mr. Tak, 22, does have a few high-caste friends but they won't eat with him.

Nor is marriage a way out. Intercaste marriage with an untouchable remains almost unheard of in India. Recently, a boy from the untouchable clothes-washing caste who married a girl from a high-ranking warrior caste, was arrested a few days later by the police on kidnapping charges filed by the bride's brother.

"We'll all probably end up as sweepers," says Mr. Tak, using the Hindi nickname for scavengers. "Cleaning excrement is the only way to feed our families. It is up to God to decide."

#### "Children of God"

The Hindu belief in **reincarnation**-that a person's soul is reborn after death as the caste or creature befitting their **karma**, or life's deeds-underlies a deep sense of fatalism in India. It made the revolutionary Gandhi angry. He rechristened the untouchables "Harijans; children of God, and preached as much for their liberation as for India's freedom from Britain. In fact, Gandhi was the first Indian personality to take a special interest in the scavengers. He urged associates to dispose of their own excrement themselves. "Scavenging, intelligently taken up, will help one to a true appreciation of the equality of man," Gandhi wrote.

#### Toilet Training

The scavenger's plight was largely forgotten until 1969. Bindeshwar Pathak was given the assignment to help India honor the 100th anniversary of Gandhi's birth. Dr. Panthak's answer: plumbing. Using inexpensive, earthen-pit technology, Dr. Pathak's Sulabh

International foundation now builds about 100,000 toilets a year for private and public use. The idea is to erase for scavengers' social stigma by getting rid of the need for their degrading work. Sponsored mostly by India's state and federal governments, Sulabh also maintains about 3,000 pay-for-use toilet and bath complexes in congested slum areas. (Women and the destitute are admitted free.)

At Sulabh's Delhi headquarters, toilets serve a higher calling. Excrement at the site is fed into a digester that produces enough biogas, mixed with 20% diesel, to power a 2,400 kilowatt generator for four hours a day. Sulabh's laboratory researches cholera growth and other diseases, its latrine showroom displays the latest models form bamboo and burlap to porcelain and marble. There is a museum tracing the history of toilet technology and a school to train scavenger children in vocational skills. A federal law calls for all excrement scavenging by 1997.

Back in one of the better-off farming districts of Chaumu, Mani Devi, 70, watches Sulabh workers lay bricks for a new latrine behind her house. Her whole life, Mrs. Devi has relieved herself outdoors; she hasn't a clue how to use a toilet. But she will learn, she says, because population growth is making open space harder to find. The privy should also solve another problem: As with millions of modest, rural women in India, Mrs. Devi still relieve herself only at dawn or after dark, causing health problems.

Sulabh's toilet crusade is a big hit in Chaumu-except in the scavenger colony, where no toilets have been built. "We'll keep this in mind for the next phase" says Chaumu's mayor.

In the old quarter of Jaipur, capital city of the Indian state of Rajasthan, a crowd of young men

stand beneath a makeshift tent blocking a busy road. Members of a herdsmen tribe called Meenas are on strike, they say, to demand compensation for damages caused to their shops by rioting untouchables the night before. Two dozen khaki-clad policemen with nightsticks separate the Meenas from a crowd of scavenger men, who loiter in the noon-day sun. The neighborhood, a slice of lower-caste India, is split down the middle. On one side of the main street live the Meenas, with other lower-caste Hindus and some Moslems, most of them poor but none of them untouchables. They own the tidy shops. On the other side, amid stray pigs and squalor, live the scavengers.

Relations are usually civil, locals say, though untouchability is the rule. The evening before, a scavenger boy carrying a jug of milk brushed against a drunk Meena, who responded by bloodying the boy's face. Scavenger men came to the boy's rescue. In the riot, scavengers threw bricks at the Meena shops, breaking some windows.

Chei Behari, a high-caste businessman says "I told the politicians to leave; we're trying to have peace here. It's just amazing how we're still in the same social trap we've been in for thousands of years. Nothing will change until people stop believing in reincarnation and start believing in themselves.

