The Plight of India's Railways Sanitation Workers: A Health and Sanitation Public Policy Perspective

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Abstract : *India remains a caste-based society, and communities are categorised based on caste identity and their sociocultural position rather than the physical labour of individuals. Sanitation workers play a critical role in cleaning and maintaining the environment, but systemic marginalisation continues through the static framework of varna. The discriminatory mindset perpetuates the dominance of social relations. Across the Indian subcontinent, these legacy caste communities are reduced to sanitation work, which includes the manual disposal of both human and animal waste. The removal of decomposing animal carcasses and hazardous manual cleaning of public and private latrines and sewers.*

Undeniably, this informal sector provides indispensable environmental, public health, and sanitation services to urban centres across India. However, despite their vital contributions, these waste pickers, scavengers, and informal urbanises remain acutely marginalised—socially, economically, and politically. Against this backdrop, this article examines the key challenges confronting unorganised sanitation workers and scavengers at the New Delhi Railway Station (NDLS) and assesses the effectiveness of policies formulated for their protection and security.

Keywords: Public Policy, Sanitation Workers, Indian Railways, Caste-based Discrimination

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INTRODUCTION

The sanitation of railway stations and train coaches is an ever-ending process and must be maintained day in and day out. According to the official report, 500,000 passengers commute every day at the New Delhi railway station, which handles more than 300 trains across its 16 platforms. Therefore, we cannot imagine that waste is produced by a massive number of passengers. This waste was cleaned and collected by these sanitation workers manually. These workers are divided into categories to collect waste from different areas of the station; however, the last year's 2025 government report on access to sanitation, under the "Swachh Bharat Mission", reports that 12 crore toilets have been built across the country to end open defaecation. This report also claims that it provides sanitation services to 450 million people through a program called Swachh Bharat(PIB, 2025). Another survey found that India has a population of 1.40 billion people who generate a whopping 72,368 against the installed treatment capacity of 31841 MLD. However, 416 you have delved deeper into the picker out of 31841 MLD, and only 26869 MLD are operational. This means that more than 70% of the generated sewage is not treated and is released directly into water bodies, polluting freshwater resources. (Jain, 2021) Not only that while a larger of urban households depends on site sanitation systems, faucal sludge management (FSM) services are often informal or poorly regulated According to Safai Karamchari Andolan leader / Social activist Bezwada Wilson A lack of state support has left them with no option but to rely on private firms and often, Manual labour to convey waste 6 or disposal, a hazardous practice out + lawed in 2013. (Amit, 2026)

The Public Policy: A Theoretical Perspective

Before looking at various public policies on the health and sanitation sector, it is pertinent to know first what public policy stands for in the real sense of the term. Why and how is this framed? Can the government function well without adopting any public policy? Why is it that some public policies succeed, while others do not? Similarly, several other issues must be addressed to understand the width and depth of public policies.

Over the years, several theories and concepts have evolved regarding the evaluation of public policy by several scholars; undoubtedly, it helps us to see the larger problem in policy.

The Notion of Public Policy

Policy is a notion that dominates our understanding of the way we are governed. In the existing "political practice", the definition of public policy is "a prior statement of the actions and commitments" for the future weather for the government or private institutions. For instance, the policy could be in different sectors, including education, environment, industry, or, in the present context, the policy on health and sanitation management and the unorganised sector.

The discussion of the policy usually rests on three assumed characteristics, according to Colebatch. These are Coherence, Hierarchy and Instrumentation. As per the Colebatch, there are broadly three central elements in the way that the term is used.

1.Authority, which legitimates the policy, that is, Parliament.

2.Expertise, which requires knowledge of the problem area.

3.Order: The policy decision is governed by the formula of universal application.

Public policy terms are recurrently used in our daily lives. We often read newspapers and television about different policies, such as public health policy and agriculture policy and so forth. Public policies are primarily set by the government. to cater to public needs and demands.

The Concept of Public Policy

We find a very in-depth study of the field of public policies in the works of James E. Anderson in his legendary work 'Public Policy Making: An Introduction" (6th edition), 2006. He defined public policy as "A purposive course of action followed by an actor or a set of actors in dealing with a problem or matter of concern."

1.Policies consist of courses of action taken over time by government officials, rather than their separate, discrete decisions.

2.Anderson had explained the perception behind the concept of "Policy Output" or "the action" that is engaged in the undertaking of both decisions and statements of the policy.

This concept generally emphasises issues such as the amount of taxes collected, how long the highway was built, welfare benefits paid, etc. The policy output is completely different from the policy outcomes.

Aderson clearly distinguished between positive and negative policies. According to him, a policy may be either positive or negative. He argues that certain forms of "governmental actions" may grapple with a matter where action is required, it's called (positive), or if government officials may take a decision to not to act on the issues where government engagement was sought after (negative). Thus, the government may tend to adopt a policy of "laissez-faire", or "hands off" approach in some facets of factivity that involve the economy.

Sanitation: Discussion and Reflection

According to many recent survey research, "India has a population of 1.48 billion people" who generate a whopping 72,368 MLD against the installed treatment capacity of 31841 MLD. However, if you look deeper into the particular out of the 31841 MLD, only 26859 MLD is operational. This means that more than 70% of the generated sewage is not directly related to the water bodies, polluting our freshwater resources. (Jain, Sewage Treatment in Indian Cities., 2021)Dr Anne Scheinberg and Malati Gadgil argued that middle-income countries such as India have young populations, growing economies, rising GDP, and an associated upward demand for better services, cleaner cities, but also more products and packages. We are witnessing:

· There is a demand from the community, who are breaking into the "middle class" (from five per cent to 41 per cent), who deserve a good life, which comprises more consumer goods (consumer goods will account for sq. per cent of the country's consumption), better household infrastructure, and a cleaner living environment (Mukherjee and Satija 2018).

India has launched five national sanitation policies since independence, and among those, the Swachh Bharat Mission – Grameen is 5the world's largest sanitation campaign. Despite this achievement, literature on the evaluation and impact of these policies is scarce. (Jain P. S., 2024). The evaluation of Indian Sanitation policies and their impact is summarised in various research works done by the Rural Development Ministry and other research institutes. Let us discuss these five national sanitation policies since independence.

Central Rural Sanitation Programme (1986-1999). Meanwhile, you will find that in rural India, there is a better life and a sense of both privacy and dignity for women, increasing rural sanitation coverage by 25%. For a 1,500-toilet Model, the BPL households could receive 0:20 of the cost from the central and state governments, the remaining to be covered by the household, whereas the total sanitation campaign improves the general quality of life and promises universal sanitation. Coverage in rural areas by 2012.

Apart from toilet construction, emphasis is placed on information, education, and communication activities. Nirmal Bharat Abhiyan (2012-14) increased sanitation coverage in rural areas. IEC activities are retained as the cornerstone of the Programme: First, to include certain above- poverty line (APL) households for or ' 5,500Model toilet, the eligible household will get ' 3,200 and 1,400 from the central and state budget, respectively.

2014-2019 Swachh Bharat Mission Grameen: Improve the general quality of rural life by eliminating "open defecation "on 2 October 2019. More flexibility is provided to these states. Inclusion of urban areas for the first time, continued inclusion of BPOL and Certain APL households. Government statistics claim 100% coverage across the rural and urban areas of India.

Now, discuss the rural sanitation strategy (2019-2029). During the brief discussion, the policy could sustain the gains of the SBM-G. It ensures the safety and accessibility of sanitation across rural India and sustains a clean and healthy living environment through solid and liquid waste management.

After the deep dive, it is necessary to look into the sanitation measures and methods of promotion of mechanisms to prevent human contact with hazardous waste and the appropriate treatment and disposal of wastewater. It is also imperative to shed light on the idea of on-site sanitation. The "sanitation system" is well-defined as where the excreta and wastewater are collected, then stored or treated on the floor itself. According to Dahlberg's study, it states that five million sanitation workers chances of contact with "human faecal matter". Two million of these workers' jobs are at high risk. All these sanitation workers were clubbed into an "amorphous category"; their work is a range of cleaning activities, including latrines, sewers, faecal sludge handling, and drain and sewage treatment plant work (111ht).

Major Barriers

Some of the challenges and barriers faced by the Valmiki community include:

- Caste-based discrimination
- Scavenging problem
- Fear of safety and survival

Caste-Based Discrimination

There is no denying that Indian society remains deeply rooted in caste-based discrimination, social exclusion, and exploitation across both rural and urban spaces. Members of the marginalised Dalit community continue to face severe challenges in the workplace. Specifically, for sanitation workers engaged in hazardous urban sanitation works like cleaning sewers, septic tanks, and performing manual scavenging, the severity of violence and caste discrimination intensifies significantly.

Scholars have defined the nature of caste discrimination in Indian society. Among them, French scholar Louis Dumont analysed the Indian caste system through a structural hierarchy based on the "binary opposition' of purity and impurity in his magnum opus, *Homo Hierarchicus* (1966). In the caste hierarchical system, Brahmins are at the top of the order, whereas those at the bottom are "untouchable" and are considered polluted and inferior. Dumont argued that the nature of the caste system in India is largely an "ideological and religious" tradition rather than an economic or political outcome. He theorised that the ritual status held by Brahmins was superior to even the political power occupied by the Kshatriyas. Nevertheless, critics such as M. N. Srinivas and McKim Marriott argue that Dumont over simplified an intricate caste system into a "binary opposition "of pure and impure. Both scholars point out that he presents a typically "Brahmanical standpoint" that is rooted in ancient canonical texts. However, his model still offers a foundational basis for comprehending the hierarchical nature of caste. Caste is one of the root causes of atrocities against marginalised communities in India.

Caste discrimination is a widespread issue in Indian society. Although this discrimination is often displayed in more subtle forms in urban spaces like Delhi, it remains plainly discernible in the case of sanitation workers. Irrespective of individual merit or proficient performance, the caste remains dominant in society. Ambedkar rightly stated, "caste is a state of mind" rather than merely a "category of the division of labour". Subsequently, the challenge lies in the deconstruction of this systemic subjugation and dominance; particularly, the plight of deprived communities like *safai karamchari, it* requires both policy and legal intervention to sustain their fundamental "right to live with dignity".

The physical scavenging problem is rooted in a societal structure that fails to account for people's hard work and effort, rather than being based only on an individual's caste-based location. This issue also shows a critical failure of the administrative system, which forces individuals to engage in this practice of degrading work due to the lack of alternative mechanised scavenging options. Most sanitation workers are compelled to undertake hazardous work to survive as their families depend on the income they obtain from scavenging. Our field survey specifies that the majority of these sanitation workers do not speak out against the brutality and inhuman treatment they face; their reluctance is driven by their fear of losing their jobs. This serves as the only source of income. Eventually, the scavenging problem was fundamentally linked to individual dignity, fundamental rights, and security.

Source: Fieldwork Data Collected by Authors

We conducted a survey in Delhi's urban spaces regarding *safai karamcharis* (sanitation workers) and the challenges they faced in their daily scavenging work. While the survey included various questions, it placed a strong emphasis on three specific enquiries:

1. Do you feel that others look down on you because you are sweeper?
2. Do you engage in substance abuse while working or before your shift?
3. Do you feel that you are doing this work because of your caste?

Do you feel that others look down on you because you are sweeper?

Options	(%)
Yes	64.6
No	29.9
No opinion	5.5

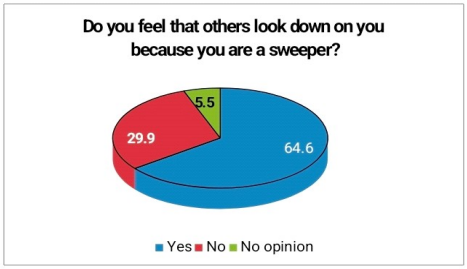

Figure 1

Social Stigma: The responses to the first question reveal that an overwhelming majority (64.6%) of respondents feel others look down on them for being sweepers, 29.9% stated they do not feel this way, and 5.5% chose to remain silent. These figures demonstrate that the occupation definitely carries social humiliation; society

continues to judge individuals based on the nature of their work.

Do you experience substance abuse while working or before work?

Options	(%)
Yes	77.1
No	22.9
Total	**100.0**

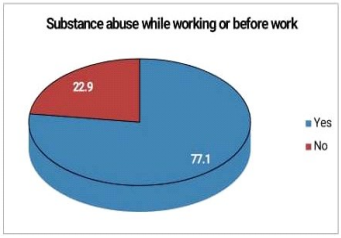

Figure 2

The answers to the second question illustrate an extremely worrisome aspect of today's India reality: 77.1% of respondents admitted to consuming substances, such as alcohol or drugs, either before or during their cleaning. Only 22.9% stated that they did not rely on substance use to perform their duties. This highlights the severe negative physical and psychological impact of their job, and the nature of the work coerced them to abuse substances such as drugs to grapple with it.

Do you feel that you are doing this work because of your caste?

Options	(%)
Yes	56.9
No	36.1
No opinion	7.0

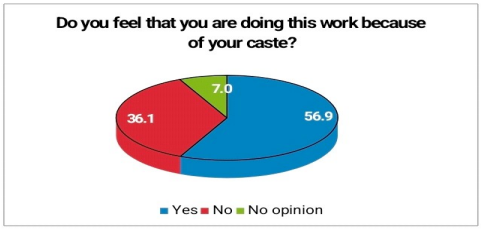

Figure 3

The third question underscores the relationship between identity and labour, with 56.9% of respondents stating that their lower-caste identity compels them into this line of work due to a systemic lack of alternative livelihood opportunities for them in the urban space. On the other hand, 36.1% of workers say they are doing this work not because of caste but because of a lack of alternative opportunities. 7% refused to answer our query.

These data conspicuously demonstrate how occupation and caste lead to the dehumanisation of individuals within urban spaces like Delhi. Finally, these findings debunk the notion of the urban city in India, revealing a distressing gap between so-called welfare policies and ground realities.

Scavenging Problem

Manual scavenging exists in Indian society even after more than seven decades of freedom. It is a stain on our "collective conscience" that has failed to be abolished or mitigated, notwithstanding the efforts of both legislative and judicial. Scavenging is indeed one of the worst, insensitive, and undignified forms of work; it is widespread across India. (Dahiya, 2020).Manual scavenging represents the classic form of caste-based suppression and discrimination. The insensitive and disgraceful "practice of untouchability" lingers in society and thrives in India. Hence, the question of the fear of safety and survival naturally arises. Besides the social subjugation and atrocities, these sanitation workers are vulnerable to exposure to health-related chronic ailments in the job of cleaning that involves hazardous activities.They come into contact with detrimental gases like "methane and hydrogen sulphide, cardiovascular degeneration, musculoskeletal disorders like osteoarthritic changes and intervertebral disc herniation."[1]

Options	(%)
Foot over bridge	30.6
AT Platform	16.7
In Stopped Trains	1.4
Railway tracks	18.1
By Machine	4.9
From the Drains of the railway tracks	0.7
Railway Tracks Damage	1.4
No opinion	26.2
Total	**100**

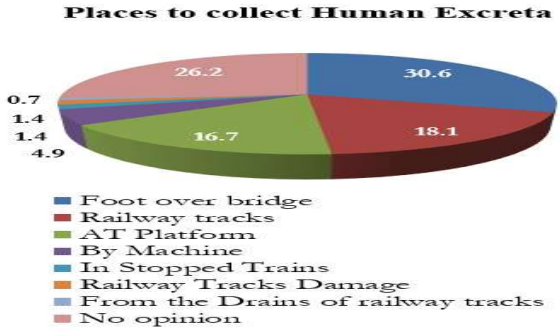

Figure 4

When we investigated the collection of human excreta, sanitation workers explained the exact locations involved. Figure 4 demonstrates that across various areas of the railway station—including foot overbridges, tracks, and platforms—30.6 per cent of respondents state that human excreta is collected from the foot overbridges. Most of these areas lack proper lighting and public convenience, leading people to defaecate there. Moreover, 18.1 per cent say that it is collected from the railway tracks; most depressingly, these workers lack the proper equipment to do so. Another 16.7 per cent is a collection on the platforms, 1.4 per cent from damaged areas of the tracks, 1.4 per cent from stopped trains and track drains, and 26.2 per cent is from other places.

This data underlines the deep lack of public concern for hygiene and an insensitivity toward sanitation workers who deal with this humiliating work daily. These excreta are produced by others and collected by sanitation workers. There is an extreme lack of empathy among the public, and workers are often looked down upon because they do

this disgraceful work. This situation mirrors the complete failure of the administrative system and its policies.

Sanitation Worker

The responsibility of a sanitation worker is to clean, maintain, operate, or empty the machine at any step of the "sanitation chain"(World Bank, 2019).The privatisation of the sanitation department means that these workers are recruited by the Municipal Corporation or the Central/state government. Employment has been deregulated since the 2010s, and this deregulation has weakened the power of trade unions. Numerous Valmikis are engaged in the sanitation department of the government. Now, they are confronting the challenge of security and fear of joblessness in the future.

According to many research scholars and Bezwada Wilson (SKA), sanitation workers are indispensable to sustain cleanliness services in homes to other places such as schools, hospitals, and other public places to protect the health of others. While performing their duties, they face perilous health risks and intensive labour, which demands prolonged work in confined spaces, leading to psychological trauma. During his research, the author collected data from the ground. He concluded in his research that "these risks are exacerbated under conditions of poverty, drug and alcohol abuse, discrimination, social stigma, and societal neglect". Like India, various other third-world nations, these workers are susceptible due to the nature of an "unregulated environment" and labour protections, and anacute lack ofhealth and safety in the occupation.(Hemali Harish Oza, 2022)

What is Hurting Valmiki Social Group

As an integral part of this community and working with various groups, for example, Ashok Venkataraima Sharma and Sayuth Aggarwal, I realise that the problems faced can be attributed to a couple of reasons. The first is the indecisiveness of the government and the failure of policy. The major challenge encountered with Valmikis is that the government is not acknowledging the existence of manual scavenging. If the government concedes that problems exist,then raise questions: can it even reflect on exterminating them? Therefore, Valmikis have a government-funded job refuted by the governments themselves.

Another crucial aspect of this problem is that the majority of Valmikis wanted to continue working. These sanitation workers are in a "mental state" in which they consider scavenging and cleaning to be a birthright. "Who would have believed that even such a hazardous job could provide one with a job facility? "There is an immense lack of livelihood opportunities for these people. Even among Valmik is, there is a sense of fear that this cleaning job could also be lost to other (Dalit) communities if they refuse to perform menial jobs. There is an acute lack of alternative livelihood opportunities in the city.

CONCLUSION

Sanitation workers always risk health-related issues due to the nature of their work, so there must be a special package with weekly check-ups on a priority basis. There is no state-supported mechanism to help them if they fall ill or die. Although these train coaches have installed the bio-toilet, it still requires more installation of bio-toilets to de-escalate the mental trauma of scavengers. The major challenge is that passengers do not know how to use the bio-toilet properly. Workers are still required to collect human waste. Indian Railways Needs to introduced advanced technology, such as robots, to assist sanitation workers. It is necessary to increase the disposal of night soil and sewage systems to reduce the life risks of workers. The plight of sanitation workers can only be reduced by introducing cutting-edge technology and providing social security.

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