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IVAN IYER

**The ‘Abolishing’ of Manual Scavenging:
Negotiations with Caste and Occupation in Ahmedabad**

ABSTRACT Despite laws prohibiting the occupation of manual scavenging, it is widely prevalent in India. While it is recognised as a hazardous and undignified occupation that involves the manual handling of excreta, it is also recognised as a form of caste-based discrimination that is performed by the lowest Dalit castes in India. In Ahmedabad, manual scavenging and sanitation work is performed by the Bhangis who lack access to alternative occupations and bear the brunt of untouchability. While sanitation workers, activists, NGOs and trade unions attempt to uncover the prevalence of manual scavenging in Ahmedabad, government bodies continue to deny the existence of manual scavenging and caste based discrimination as such. In this paper, I look at the ways in which the occupation of manual scavenging is articulated, contested and negotiated by the aforementioned actors in Ahmedabad.

KEYWORDS manual scavenging, caste-based discrimination, technological solutions, rehabilitation schemes, graded hierarchy of caste

1. Introduction

Manual scavenging has been recognised internationally as a violation of basic human rights of health and dignity (Human Rights Watch 2014). However, despite laws that prohibit manual scavenging and declare the enforcement of the occupation of manual scavenging as a punishable offence (Government of India 2013), manual scavenging is widely prevalent in India (Shaikh 2018). In “The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013”, a manual scavenger is defined as,

“a person engaged or employed, at the commencement of this act or at any time thereafter, by an individual or local authority or an agency or a contractor, for manually cleaning, carrying, disposing of, or otherwise handling in any manner, human excreta in an insanitary latrine or in open drain or pit into which the human excreta from the insanitary latrines is disposed of, or on a railway track or in such other spaces or premises, as the Central Government or a State Government may notify, before the excreta fully decomposes in such a manner as may be prescribed” (Government of India 2013, Clause 2[g]: 3).

“Manual scavenging”, the Act clarifies, “shall be construed accordingly” (Government of India 2013, Clause 2[g]: 3). In this paper, I look at the ways in which the occupation of manual scavenging is contested and negotiated by municipal bodies, sanitation workers, Dalit¹ activists, NGOs, and trade unions in Ahmedabad, in the state of Gujarat.

The paper is organised into two sections. In the first section, I look at the solutions recommended for the “eradication” and “abolishing”² of manual scavenging, and attempt to problematise the idea of manual scavenging as a sanitation issue and/or an issue of caste-based discrimination³. I argue that, in Ahmedabad, technological solutions and rehabilitation schemes have been unable to effect a transformative change towards dismantling the close correlation between caste identity and sanitation occupations in the case of the Bhangis⁴, who lack access to alternative occupations. In the second section, I argue that, owing to the vulnerable socio-economic position of the Bhangis and the denial of manual scavenging and untouchability by the state government, it has not been yet possible for activists, NGOs, CBOs (Community Based Organization)⁵ and trade unions to articulate caste-based discrimination and labour rights simultaneously in the case of manual scavenging. Lastly, I argue that the issue of manual scavenging continues to be isolated from the larger Dalit movement in Ahmedabad, owing to the caste position of the Bhangis even amongst the Dalits. I conclude by reflecting on the relationship between neoliberalism and sanitation work in India.

This paper is primarily based on a series of interviews that I conducted in Ahmedabad between August and December 2016 for my M.Phil dissertation. My initial research question was an attempt to understand the relationship between the demand for the rights of permanency for sanitation

workers in the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation and demands for the “eradication” of manual scavenging⁶ (Dhar 2016). I followed a snow-ball sampling method and conducted 22 interviews with various individuals, ranging from sanitation workers to activists and government officials. The most important assumption of this paper, i.e. the close correlation between caste identity and sanitation-based occupations, is partly based on Paul D’Souza’s PhD dissertation (D’Souza 2005) on the scavenging castes in Ahmedabad. Unlike his study, my own method for studying the representation of and contestations to manual scavenging in Ahmedabad did not involve a quantitative survey. Rather, I followed leads by respondents regarding other potential respondents in an attempt to understand the networks of alliance and conflict between the various actors contesting and negotiating the persistence of manual scavenging in Ahmedabad. Ultimately, my research presents the many difficulties and contradictions that are encountered by sanitation workers, activists, NGOs and trade unions in the struggle against manual scavenging in Ahmedabad⁷.

2. Solving manual scavenging: between technological renovation and rehabilitation schemes

“The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act” of 1993 is the first ever legislation that prohibited the practice of manual scavenging and deemed it a punishable offence. However, there are two problems with this legislation. Firstly, by making the prohibition of dry latrines a central factor in the abolition of manual scavenging, it did not take into consideration a wider range of occupations which involve the unsafe and undignified handling of excreta, such as manual scavenging in sewers. In contrast, the 2013 Act includes a wider variety of occupations under the definition of manual scavenging, thereby making it possible to contest a wider range of manual scavenging practices⁸. This is significant, since it argues against simplistic correlations that might be made between the destruction of dry latrines and the abolishing of manual scavenging (Janvikas 2012: 6). Secondly, the 1993 Act does not include the relationship between the occupation of manual scavenging and caste identity. Since the 2013 Act connects the occupation of

manual scavenging to caste-based discrimination (Government of India 2013), it points towards a socio-economics of this occupation that is closely tied to caste identity. In addition to the recognition of a wider variety of occupations that comes within the purview of manual scavenging and the recognition of the link between manual scavenging and caste identity, the 2013 Act also recommends the introduction of new technology for the purpose of cleaning sewers and septic tanks, and also recommends rehabilitation measures for manual scavengers in the form of loans and scholarships. While such measures and recommendations are popularly viewed as potential solutions towards the eradication of manual scavenging, I will show how, in the case of Ahmedabad, such ‘solutions’ have been unsuccessful in the context of the close relationship between sanitation occupations and caste identity.

Dalit leaders and activists such as Bezwada Wilson of the Safai Karamchari Andolan have argued that manual scavenging needs to be viewed not as an issue of sanitation but rather as one of caste (Subrahmaniam 2016). As various scholars have pointed out, manual scavenging and sanitation work is performed by a particular group of Dalit castes (Jodhka 2002; Prashad 2001; D’Souza 2005) in India. While most of these castes are known commonly as “Valmiki”⁹, Om Prakash Valmiki points out that there are at least 276 different caste groups that are deemed to be traditional inheritors of scavenging work (Valmiki 2014). In recent years, documentary films on manual scavenging, such as *Kakoos* (2017) by Divya Bharati have also extensively highlighted the relationship between manual scavenging and caste identity. However, while it has been highlighted by scholars and filmmakers that manual scavenging is a caste-based occupation and not simply a problem of sanitation, there has been little study carried out on the solutions that have been devised for the eradication of manual scavenging and the contradictions faced by civil society organisations to articulate and contest the occupational practice of manual scavenging. Hence, I show that, despite the recognition of manual scavenging as a form of caste-based discrimination, it continues to be a problem that can purportedly be solved by technological innovations, innovations that have failed to dismantle the relationship between caste identity and sanitation occupations in Ahmedabad. In the next section, I argue that, in the case of Ahmedabad, despite various actors working towards the eradication

of manual scavenging, it is crucial to differentiate between the approach towards manual scavenging as a problem of labour rights, and approaches that emerge from a critique of caste as such. Finally, I indicate that even though manual scavenging is one form of caste discrimination, the issues faced by the Bhangis seem to be isolated from the larger Dalit movement in Ahmedabad.

In Gujarat, the most widely known caste of hereditary scavengers are the “Bhangis”¹⁰. According to D’Souza, the Bhangis are the third largest group within the Dalits in Gujarat (D’Souza 2005: 73). He argues that most Bhangis originally lived in rural areas and are typically landless. 21.3% of all Bhangis in Gujarat live in Ahmedabad district. 22% of these listed Ahmedabad as their place of birth, while the rest claim to have migrated from villages. Some of the older respondents claim that their forefathers migrated to Ahmedabad centuries ago. This at least suggests a very long span of time. D’Souza explains that many Bhangis found occupation as sanitation workers under the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (hereafter abbreviated as AMC) after they were laid off from their jobs in textile mills. According to D’Souza, new migrants to the city have been unable to find living quarters, unlike those that were provided to an earlier generation of sanitation workers by the AMC. Hence, the majority live in slums spread out across the city, slums that D’Souza explains to be largely ‘transitory’ and/or ‘peripheral’ territories composed of residential structures built out of relatively impermanent materials. He argues that many of the older generation have even moved to ‘better’ residential localities that constitute territories composed of more permanent and sturdier residential structures. Overall, their population can be said to be distributed between hamlets, quarters, housing societies and slums. According to D’Souza’s study, 52% of the Bhangis in Ahmedabad live in slums, 13% have managed to get homes in ‘better’ residential areas, and 29% have availed of quarters provided by the AMC. He argues that while urbanisation has managed to break traditional caste barriers and their geographies to some extent, it is still inconceivable for most lower castes, and especially Bhangis, to live in mixed-caste localities. Nonetheless, during the course of my fieldwork, some of my respondents who are occupied as scavengers, also remarked that in mixed-caste localities, Bhangis daily face practices of untouchability at the hands of upper-caste Hindus and higher Dalit sub-castes, such

as the strict segregation of dwelling spaces and non-partaking of food and water, which serve to reinforce caste hierarchies and are supposed to be reminders to the Bhangis of their caste status. These hierarchies and relationships also tend to get translated into the kind of occupations that are available for the Bhangis¹¹.

In his research, D'Souza notes that there is very little occupational mobility amongst the scavenger community in Ahmedabad, and that nearly 58% of men and 44% of women from these communities are engaged in scavenging work (D'Souza 2005: 116). Moreover, he argues that the process of urbanisation has, in fact, firmly established the role of the Bhangis as scavengers. While in this essay I do not look closely at the effects of urbanisation and the occupational practices of the Bhangis in Ahmedabad, some of my respondents currently occupied as scavengers argued that they and their forefathers were engaged in similar occupations even before migrating to cities like Ahmedabad. A majority of the scavengers in Ahmedabad are employed in the formal sector as contractual workers and the rest work as daily wage labourers in private companies and residential colonies (D'Souza 2005). Nonetheless, as D'Souza notes, the Warasdar¹² system is still in currency amongst scavengers working in private residential colonies and those employed in the municipal corporation. While the Warasdari system is regressive in that it reproduces the caste basis of sanitary work, it is also seen as crucial in the absence of alternative occupations. Moreover, in the case of manhole workers, I show how the contractual system of employment and specific conditions regarding promotions in the case of manhole work, have reinforced the Warasdari system and preserved the correlation between caste identity and sanitation occupations in Ahmedabad¹³.

In Ahmedabad, manual scavengers engaged in sewer cleaning work are known as manhole workers and, like other manual scavengers, manhole workers tend to be from the Bhangi caste. Keshavbhai is a supervisory officer for manhole workers and one of the founders of the "Manhole Workers Union" in the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation. His employment with the municipal corporation began as a contractual manhole worker in 1988. In 2001, Keshavbhai and his colleagues formed the Manhole Workers Union, and their primary work in the initial years was to make safety gear available for manhole workers. The urgent need to unionise was felt after

a study conducted in 1997 (KSSM 1997) that revealed a range of chronic ailments among a sample of 400 manhole workers in Ahmedabad¹⁴. Keshavbhai explains that, according to the policy of the AMC, all temporary employees are eligible for the post of permanent employees after a period of five years or 900 days. Since many manhole workers were in employment as contractual employees for many years, one of his main efforts was to get permanent employee status for about 2,500 manhole workers employed as contractual labourers in the AMC¹⁵. In 2004, the Manhole Workers Unions succeeded in getting permanent employee status for about 2,500 manhole workers employed in the municipal corporation. Keshavbhai argues that while the promotion to permanent employee status ensures greater salary, basic job security and healthcare, it has not done away with the insecurities of workers from the Bhangi community regarding their future. Hence, even though permanent employees may seem to be in a better position, they implicitly favour the Warasdari system and the security that it offers by ensuring jobs for their next of kin. Keshavbhai argues that such an attitude is in fact implicitly promoted by the municipal corporation. For instance, he explains that, after the granting of permanent status in 2004 to those manhole workers who were working on contractual basis, he and his colleagues wanted to promote more workers from the Bhangi community to supervisory posts in the municipal corporation, since supervisory posts entailed a lack of involvement with manhole work itself, a permanent job and a higher salary. Keshavbhai and his colleagues believed that this was important as it could lead towards a dismantling of the correlation between Bhangis and manhole work. However, according to the rules laid down by the corporation, whoever would be promoted to supervisory posts would not be able to avail of housing facilities, and their offspring would not be assured employment in the case of their death. While such a system may seem fair in a rational sense, it dissuaded many workers from taking up supervisory posts, and, according to Keshavbhai, it was a deliberate ploy to keep Bhangis in non-supervisory posts as far as manhole work was concerned.

In 2006, following the deaths of several manhole workers, a Public Interest Litigation (hereafter abbreviated to PIL) was filed by a number of organisations (including the KSSM and the Manhole Workers Union), bringing to the notice of the government the dangerous and inhuman

working conditions that manhole workers were subjected to. Subsequently, the Gujarat High Court declared, in what is considered a historic judgment (Vyas, Mehta 2006), that no worker could be asked to go down manholes unless it was “absolutely necessary” (Vyas, Mehta 2006: 25)¹⁶. In any case, the workers were instructed to be provided with adequate safety gear, and it was made mandatory for a fire brigade to be on standby in case there was any threat to the life of any worker. Hence, while the judgment prohibited manhole work, it also implicitly assumed the inevitability of this work. Nonetheless, Keshavbhai argues that this condition is not simply contradictory or reflective of inconsistency. He explains that, in the early 2000s, expensive suction machines were imported from abroad by the Ahmedabad municipal corporation in order to clean sewage lines. However, he argues that the structure of the sewage lines in Ahmedabad is such that they cannot be de-congested using these machines. Hence, one necessarily needs to send workers down manholes to manually de-congest the sewers in cases of clogging.

Kadarbhai, the founder of a company based in Ahmedabad that specialises in the manufacture of hydraulic machines and waste disposal equipment, explains that, following the High Court judgment in 2006, he was commissioned by the municipal commissioner to construct machines that were affordable and structurally adequate to de-congest sewer lines in Ahmedabad. He claims that, while his company was able to develop such machines, it was not clear as to who would operate them. In the bid to allegedly preserve the livelihoods of workers from the Bhangi community, a scheme was conceptualised whereby these workers could use loans provided by the Gujarat Safai Kaamdar Vikas Nigam (GSKVN)¹⁷ to buy these machines, operate them and contract them out. While such a plan potentially provided them with the possibility of entrepreneurship, it did not do much towards dismantling the correlation between their caste identity and occupation. It is worth noting here that the GSKVN was envisioned by the government as an organisation that would help rehabilitate the Bhangis through opening up access to alternative livelihood opportunities.

The Indian government has allocated nearly US\$ 325 million to rehabilitation schemes for scavengers, such as “The Self Employment Scheme for Rehabilitation of Manual Scavengers”, which is one of the better-

known schemes initiated by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment in 2007 (Human Rights Watch 2014), that provides loans and training programmes for manual scavengers or their dependents, who are 18 years old or above¹⁸. In the case of the GSKVN, many of my respondents, ranging from sanitation workers to activists engaged in the struggle against manual scavenging, argue that the loan schemes provided by the corporation have not only not proved useful for most of the recipients, but have pushed them into deeper cycles of debt.

According to D.K. Dubey, one of the founders of the Manhole Workers Union, most of the recipients of these loans tend to 'misuse' these loans on motorbikes, stereo systems and electronic luxury items. While such characterisations seem to reinforce already existing harmful stereotypes regarding the Bhangi community, Dubey argues that the size of the loans do not enable investment in new business ventures but only enable immediate spending on what one may consider to be luxury goods. According to Deval Vaghela, an independent Dalit activist and lawyer based in Anand in Gujarat, the size of the loans offered by corporations such as the GSKVN are connected to the contractual systems of employment, and reflect a larger ploy of the government to keep individuals from these castes dependent on the Warasdari system as their only source of security and power. He explains that the majority of the loans that are available range from 25,000 to 40,000 rupees (340-545 US\$) and so do not help in setting up new business enterprises. Nevertheless, not only is the application process for loans a tedious process, but Vaghela argues that it is often not possible to avail of these loans without the help of middlemen. Ultimately, applicants often receive less than half of the already insubstantial loan that they have applied for. According to Vajjubhai, who works as a scavenger in residential colonies in the Jodhpur area of Ahmedabad, while the loans provided by the GSKVN might be helpful, it is crucial to note who is actually eligible for these loans. He argues that for anybody to be eligible for these loans, they are asked to produce utility bills and other documents that would indicate domicile. Vajjubhai argues that such documents are only possible to produce in the first place if one is the owner of property in the form of land or a house, which in the case of Bhangis such as Vajjubhai is an impossibility. Schemes designed by the GSKVN then, seem to address the lack of alternative opportunities for the members of scavenging

communities through monetary assistance, but are ultimately not able to take into account the lived realities of social life in which caste identity and historically accumulated oppression prohibits the receipt of these loans.

In the case of Ahmedabad then, while technological solutions and rehabilitation schemes seem to offer solutions towards the eradication of manual scavenging, they are beset by a range of contradictions that are not only unable to dismantle the correlation between caste identity and sanitation work, but also have produced new cycles of debt in the Bhangi communities. Ultimately, it seems as if the municipal corporation, government bodies such as the GSKVN, and even the legislations prohibiting different kinds of manual scavenging, assume the occupation of manual scavenging to be inevitable and as something that cannot actually be 'abolished'. Nevertheless, what is also revealing about the socio-political economy of manual scavenging is that it in fact cannot simply be 'eradicated' or 'abolished'. While in this section I attempted to problematise the different solutions that are devised for the 'abolishing' of manual scavenging, in the next section I look at the efforts by activists and civil society organisations, such as NGOs and trade unions in Ahmedabad at addressing the issue of manual scavenging and the various problems encountered therein.

3. The articulation and contestation of manual scavenging: between CBOs, NGOs, and trade unions

In Ahmedabad, a variety of actors, such as NGOs, CBOs, trade unions and independent activists are engaged in the struggle against manual scavenging and in efforts to guarantee the basic rights of sanitation workers. However, owing to the gross violation of basic human rights that is inherent in this occupation, its presence is frequently denied by government bodies and officials (Shah 2013: 2). Moreover, as I will show subsequently, scavengers in Ahmedabad are often in too vulnerable a position to protest this practice. In this section, I will attempt to present the tensions inherent in the articulation of manual scavenging through a discussion of the various actors in Ahmedabad, who are engaged in the struggle to contest manual scavenging and caste-based discrimination as such.

Naval Karthik, the former director of an Ahmedabad-based NGO engaged with Dalit issues in Gujarat, argues that the Gujarat Government has often declared the state to have been free of manual scavenging since 1992¹⁹. However, in the same year, an incident where six manhole workers died at work, led to a case of caste atrocity being filed by a grass-roots Dalit organisation, “X”. In this case, “X” had implicated persons who were private contractors and also officials in the AMC. However, none of the accused were eventually punished. In 1996, “X” and a few other organisations filed a PIL (Public Interest Litigation) in the High Court regarding the issue of manual scavenging in Gujarat, with special reference to a village near Botad in Gujarat where 45 households were engaged in the practice of manual scavenging. However, the state did not accept their research and the form of evidence that they had collected. According to Karthik, they accused “X” of having fabricated the images and of orchestrating these acts to falsely represent the village and the status of manual scavenging in Gujarat (Macwan 1998: 81). Karthik argues that it was in only response to the PIL submitted in 1996 that the 1993 Act prohibiting manual scavenging – that requires states to enact their own laws – was even enacted in Gujarat in 2000. According to some of my respondents, in response to a PIL by the Safai Karamchhari Andolan, “X” and 17 other organisations demanding a survey of the number of manual scavengers from state governments and central government ministries in 2003, the Gujarat Government filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court declaring that there is no manual scavenging in Gujarat. Similar affidavits were also filed by the government in 1996 (Macwan 1998: 73) and more recently in 2014 (Jha 2014), denying the existence of manual scavenging in Gujarat. In 2007, the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), in a study sponsored by the GSKVN, identified nearly 12,000 manual scavengers in Gujarat (Shah 2013: 2). One of the respondents in my study, H.K. Tripathy, a former director of the GSKVN, notes with reference to this study that the government constituted a committee of its own and conducted another survey by engaging various district collectors to verify the results of the TISS study. Subsequently, he argues that the state government declared that Gujarat did not have any manual scavengers and that the results of the TISS study were false, and possibly fabricated.

However, the state government's denial of the existence of manual scavenging is part of its denial of caste-based discriminatory practices in general. In 2009, "X" conducted a study spanning more than 1,500 villages in Gujarat, and revealed the presence of nearly 100 kinds of untouchability practices in rural Gujarat²⁰. While it is not the first study of untouchability in Gujarat, it is unique for the scale of the survey and its emphasis on the need to recognise "horizontal discrimination"²¹ in the case of the lowest Dalit sub-castes such as the Bhangis, who are forced into manual scavenging and face the full extent of caste-based discrimination. However, the Government of Gujarat not only did not accept these findings, but also commissioned the Center for Environmental Planning and Technology (CEPT) in Ahmedabad to undertake a study of untouchability in rural Gujarat, aimed to refute the study undertaken by "X" (Shah 2013: 2). In contrast to more than 1500 villages surveyed by "X", the study by "P" consisted of a survey of 5 villages in the state. As Shah (2013: 11) notes, it not only refuted the "X" report on flimsy grounds, but also endorsed the caste system by noting that the dominant caste sects in one of the villages promoted "positive thinking" among its followers through the Chaturvarna system²². Hence, the report was furnished not only to refute any claims of untouchability in Gujarat, but also indirectly endorsed the caste system.

An important factor that complicates any attempt to highlight the existence of manual scavenging is the vulnerable position that such an attempt puts manual scavengers in. Shankarbhai, the founder and director of the community-based organisation (CBO) "Y" in Ahmedabad that works towards the eradication of manual scavenging, pointed out that, after the 2013 Act, neither the AMC nor any other government organisation had put in any efforts towards conducting a proper survey regarding the status of open defecation and manual scavenging. In 2013, "Y" conducted a survey over a period of two to three months and submitted reports and petitions to the AMC providing accounts of people who were engaged in manual scavenging. Subsequently, senior AMC officials such as the Deputy Commissioner visited the wards (that were mentioned in the study) and interrogated the workers about their claims. Shankarbhai explains that the scavengers cowed down under such pressure and told the municipality officials that "one of their own" came to them and asked them to fill in a

form that they did not understand. Ultimately, the AMC got written testimonies from the sanitary workers that they were not engaged in this practice. After this, the workers confronted Shankarbhai, arguing that even though his engagements (demanding the implementation of laws prohibiting manual scavenging and the enforcement of caste atrocities legislation in their favour) may have been for their good, they could not participate in this effort since this would lead them to losing their livelihood and leave them completely helpless. In another instance, the NGO “X” organised a demonstration in 2009, at which more than 1,000 children of manual scavengers from 12 districts across Gujarat were assembled at the Gandhi Ashram in Ahmedabad to give accounts of the discrimination faced by them. In response, government officials seemed to take these testimonies into consideration and to move towards taking addressing the situation. Subsequently however, the officials are said to have tracked the wards of those children who were employed in municipalities, and removed them from their jobs. In both of the cases outlined above then, attempts to reveal the existence of manual scavenging and the implicit caste-based discrimination are often met with crippling consequences.

In contrast to NGOs such as “X” that primarily seek to address caste-based discrimination at the grass roots level, trade unions in Ahmedabad are primarily involved in struggles for basic rights such as regularisation of jobs, pensions and other matters pertaining to the rights of workers. In Ahmedabad, nearly 3,000 sanitation workers employed in the municipal corporation are members of trade unions such as “U”. Ashokbhai, a union organiser and member of “U”, explains that their work mainly involves the filing of litigations and organising protest demonstrations. While their strategies and methods seem to overlap with the NGOs and CBOs that I have discussed earlier, Ashokbhai attempts to clearly demarcate the role of trade unions from NGOs. According to him, the work of trade unions such as “U” is of a sustained nature, as compared to NGOs that occupy themselves with “project based” work. Such sentiments were also evoked by other respondents such as D.K. Dubey and Govardhanbhai. The apparently sustained nature of work performed by trade unions is also articulated as “practical work”, in contrast to NGOs that are seen as engaged in projects that do not lead to transformative changes in the lives of manual scavengers or lower caste sanitation workers. On the other

hand, NGOs and CBOs in Ahmedabad involved in fighting against caste-based discrimination and the occupation of manual scavenging, see trade unions as frequently engaging in practical and ideological compromise in order to achieve their aims. For example, Shankarbhai argues that in some instances where manhole workers have lost their lives while on duty, trade unionists prioritise the procuring of a minimum amount of compensation for the families of the deceased, rather than pursuing the persecution of contractors or other agents who employ manhole workers in the first place.

Since the occupation of manual scavenging often involves hazardous working conditions, it is often primarily framed as an issue of labour rights by trade unions. On the other hand, CBOs and NGOs in Ahmedabad, which are primarily engaged in Dalit issues, tend to frame manual scavenging primarily as an issue of caste-based discrimination. The manhole workers union may be taken as an exceptional example since it seems to address both kinds of issues as far as manhole work is concerned. Nonetheless, what is also important to consider here is the composition of these groups. Trade union leaders and organisers that I had a chance to speak with tend to be upper-caste, while leaders and founders of the NGOs and CBOs primarily engaged with the Dalit issues, are Dalits. Besides the arguments regarding problems with the project-based work of NGOs, trade union organisers such as Ashokbhai also feel that some of the NGOs are too aggressive and radical on an ideological level. As I observed in other such similar comments, 'aggressive' and 'radical' seem to point towards caste-based activism and the Ambedkarite²³ character of some of these organisations. It is this kind of tension then, which reveals itself as the difference between framing manual scavenging as an issue of labour rights or of caste-based discrimination. It would seem then that caste plays a very important role in the way in which the issue of manual scavenging is framed by different organisations.

Nonetheless, Shankarbhai argues that amongst Dalit activists and organisations in Ahmedabad, there exists a hierarchy where the issues faced by the lowest dalit sub-castes, such as the Bhangis, tend to be given the least priority in what he argues to be an apparent hierarchy of Dalit issues for Dalit activists and thinkers in Ahmedabad. He claims that Dalit NGOs engaged in struggles for the rights of Dalits do not seem to consider the eradication of manual scavenging as an issue of high priority and there-

fore have not made serious efforts towards collaborative work with organisations such as the Safai Karamchari Andolan. Many of my respondents remarked that in Gujarat the Bhangis are known as ‘the Dalits amongst Dalits’. For instance, Kantibhai, a scavenger who works in private residential colonies in the Thaltej area of Ahmedabad, argues that higher Dalit sub-castes engage in similar acts of untouchability with the Bhangis, as upper caste individuals do in general with Dalits, involving practices such as not partaking of food and water using the same utensils. On a broader level, Keshavbhai and Deval Vaghela claim that even though the Bhangis in Ahmedabad have participated and been allies in larger Dalit movements, other Dalits tend to distance themselves from the issues faced by the Bhangis. This is however, not to speculate about or argue for any kind of equivalence between the kind of caste discrimination faced by Dalits from upper-castes and the discrimination faced by Bhangis from other Dalits. Rather, it is to highlight the effects of what is referred to as the graded hierarchy of caste²⁴ and its effects on the representation and contestation of manual scavenging.

As I have tried to indicate above, the existence of untouchability in Gujarat is a highly contentious issue. Since caste-based discrimination and caste-based occupations such as manual scavenging are recognised as gross violations of human rights, the existence of these practices has often been denied by the state government and by government officials in Ahmedabad. Owing to the vulnerable socio-economic position of the Bhangis in Ahmedabad, it is often not possible for scavengers to assert their rights and contest the very existence of the occupation of manual scavenging. Moreover, for NGOs and trade unions in Ahmedabad, the articulation of manual scavenging as an issue of caste-based discrimination or labour rights constitute differing negotiations where it is often not possible to simultaneously make socio-political assertions and demand job security, for instance. Finally, owing to the relative lack of agency that the Bhangis seem to have had even in Dalit movements in Gujarat, it remains to be seen what kind of critique of manual scavenging will emerge from the Bhangis in Ahmedabad.

4. Conclusion

In this article, I have tried to emphasise that manual scavenging is not simply an issue of reforms in sanitation technology or occupational hazards, since such negotiations are not able to effectively dismantle the correlation between sanitation occupations and caste identity. Through a discussion of the role played by NGOs, CBOs and trade unions, I have tried to show how caste plays an important role in the way that manual scavenging is articulated, negotiated and contested. Hence, I argue that even well-intentioned-solutions to manual scavenging can be problematic or ineffective at the least, without situating manual scavenging in the context of caste. However, this is not to say that the efforts of various actors to improve the conditions of work of sanitation workers, for instance, are insignificant. Hence, while I have tried to problematise the efforts of trade unions and NGOs, it was done only to highlight the complexities that are present in the effort to articulate manual scavenging. Similarly, it cannot be denied that the introduction of new sanitation technology might make a real difference towards the eradication of manual scavenging. However, without approaching manual scavenging primarily as an issue of caste, it will be rendered an extra-ordinary issue, the solution of which purportedly lies in the form of technological innovation and reform of policy. Otherwise, regardless of these steps, the work of sanitation will continue to be carried out by Dalit castes.

Here, I will refrain from commenting in detail on the effects of neo-liberalisation on sanitation work in Ahmedabad, since I have not looked at it closely enough. Nonetheless, in the case of Ahmedabad, where there has been an increasing contractualisation of sanitation work, and amidst debates regarding the allegedly project-based concerns of internationally funded NGOs with regard to the issue of manual scavenging, any subsequent analysis of the existence of manual scavenging and contestations of it, will need to closely look at the ramifications of neoliberalism on the socio-political economy of manual scavenging in Ahmedabad.

- 1 The Hindi word “Dalit” roughly translates into “broken” and refers to the Scheduled Castes or the Untouchables in the Hindu caste system. The coinage of the term “Dalit” to refer to the scheduled castes is attributed to Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, a Dalit of the Mahar caste who founded the Depressed Classes Federation in 1930 and is argued to be primarily responsible for the system of “reservation” in the Indian Constitution for the scheduled tribes (ST), scheduled castes (SC) and other backward castes (OBC). He is one of the most powerful symbols of Dalit emancipation and political articulation (Keane, 2007).
- 2 Words like ‘eradication’ and ‘abolishing’ are frequently used with reference to manual scavenging. In this article I argue that, owing to the complex nature of the issue of manual scavenging, it is not something that can simply be eradicated or abolished.
- 3 While the word “caste” does not appear in any human rights treaty, various human rights organisations from India and Nepal have sought to highlight caste-based discrimination in their respective countries. Subsequently, in the International Convention of the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination 1965 (ICERD), and the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination (CERD), caste-based discrimination has been noted as both a form of descent-based discrimination and racial discrimination (Keane, 2007).
- 4 The Bhangis are a Dalit sub-caste in Gujarat commonly associated with sanitation and scavenging occupations.
- 5 The term “CBO” was used by some of my respondents to describe certain organisations in Ahmedabad working closely with the issues of the Bhangis.
- 6 A strike was organised by the sanitation workers employed in the Ahmedabad municipal corporation from the 22nd of August to the 27th of September, 2016. Their demands included the regularisation of full-time employees, the adjustment of salaries to inflation, and the provision of safety gear for work. In the absence of alternative livelihood opportunities and the continued existence of manual scavenging, these basic rights are very important for sanitation workers in Ahmedabad.
- 7 In the following discussion, I have changed the names of all my respondents to keep their identities confidential.
- 8 The 2013 Act also includes sewers and railway tracks as spaces where manual scavenging is practised, hence a wider range of occupations are recognised as manual scavenging practices.
- 9 The name “Valmiki” can be traced to the worship of the Hindu religious figure, Maharshi Valmiki, among the “Chuhra” and “Mehtar castes” in Punjab in the 1920s (Prashad, 2001). In the case of Ahmedabad, since “Bhangi” is often used as an abusive word by upper-caste individuals, many Bhangis prefer to use the name “Valmiki” to refer to themselves and their community. Hence, the name “Valmiki” has also somewhat acquired the status of a politically appropriate alternative to Bhangi to refer to this community.
- 10 The name “Bhangi” is apparently derived from “bhanga” or broken, implying a community the character of which is broken or destroyed, and is argued to have derogatory connotations in Gujarat (D’Souza 2005: 20).

- 11 For instance, one of my respondents, Kantibhai, a Bhangi who works as a scavenger in private residential colonies in the Thaltej area of Ahmedabad, argues that, unlike higher Dalit sub-castes like the Vankars and Chamars, the Bhangis are not employed in any sanitation work inside the homes of upper-castes.
- 12 In this system, in the event of the death or inability of a worker to carry on his/her work, a close family member such as the offspring of the worker may be given the job. "Warasdari" possibly derives from the Gujarati word "Warasdar" which translates into English as "inheritor".
- 13 The term "manhole workers" was used by some of my respondents who have been or continue to be engaged in this work. It specifically refers to workers who enter manholes in the street, to enter sewage lines and clean them.
- 14 The KSSM is the Kaamdar Swasthya Suraksha Mandal, a trust founded in 1991, dealing with the health of industrial workers in Gujarat.
- 15 Keshavbhai explains that while there has been contractual employment in sanitation work since the 1980s, he argues that in the early 2000s, subsequent to the deaths of many manhole workers, the AMC urgently began to contract out manual manhole and all kinds of sanitation work. While the AMC argued that the contract system was an effort to hire sanitation workers irrespective of caste, Keshavbhai argues that it was an obvious move by the corporation to escape culpability and responsibility. However, as D'Souza (2005) has also observed, while the contract system got individuals from other, higher Dalit sub-castes as a part of the payroll, the actual scavenging work continued to be performed by the Bhangis.
- 16 By the phrase "absolutely necessary", I mean to indicate the argument in the judgment regarding manhole workers in Ahmedabad, where Justice Vyas and Justice Mehta of the Gujarat High Court clarify that in some cases, manual manhole work would be inevitable since certain kinds of cleaning cannot be performed by machines or other equipment.
- 17 The Gujarat Safai Kaamdar Vikas Nigam, also known as the Gujarat Safai Kaamdar Development Corporation, was set up in 2001 and is considered to be the only such state-based organisation in the country for the rehabilitation of sanitation workers.
- 18 Information regarding various loan and non-loan-based schemes for those currently engaged in the occupation of manual scavenging is listed on the website of the National Safai Karamchari Finance and Development Corporation (2018).
- 19 In response to my questions regarding the existence of manual scavenging in Ahmedabad, one of my respondents, a former director of the GSKVN, claimed that there are no manual scavengers any more in Gujarat. It is worth noting that only a few weeks before our conversation, a manhole worker died while on duty, in the Vastrapur area in Ahmedabad. In another instance, while I was on my way to meet one of my respondents, Shankarbhai, a Dalit activist who has conducted numerous surveys and catalogued manual scavenging in many parts of Ahmedabad, we came across two men entering a manhole to clean a sewer line outside an office complex. On notifying a nearby police station regarding this, none of the police officers, including an inspector at a high post were aware of the 1993 or the 2013 Act. When Shankarbhai insisted on filing an FIR (First Information Report) against

- the caretaker of the office complex who had employed the workers, the inspector suggested against such a move and let off the caretaker with a warning. Instances such as the above, of the denial of manual scavenging by government officials and the ignorance of law enforcers regarding the laws prohibiting manual scavenging in Ahmedabad, provide a glimpse of the apathetic nature towards the occupation of manual scavenging and, by virtue, the blindness towards caste.
- 20 Examples of untouchability practices include the segregation of food and water, segregation of seating arrangements, walking paths, denying access to Dalits to public facilities such as common water reservoirs, schools, post-offices, and denying entry into temples and other daily amenities such as the barbershop and milk dairy.
 - 21 "Horizontal discrimination" refers to the discrimination faced by Dalits such as the Bhangis by higher Dalit sub-castes as opposed to "vertical discrimination", that is the discrimination faced by Dalits from non-Dalit upper-caste groups.
 - 22 Chaturvana refers to the conception and categorisation of Hindu society into four broad groups (or varnas) of the Brahmin, Kshatriya, Vaishya and Shudra (Ambedkar, 1944: 33).
 - 23 The term 'Ambedkarite' refers to those individuals, groups or thought processes that are based on Ambedkarism i.e. the philosophy and political position that recognizes its genesis in the philosophy and work of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar, who argued that the untouchables could only seek emancipation from the caste system by relying on their own assertions, in contrast to upper-caste reformists like M.K. Gandhi who believed that caste based society could potentially be egalitarian.
 - 24 By 'the graded hierarchy of caste' I am referring to B.R. Ambedkar's theorisation of the caste system amongst the Hindus, where he argued that the caste system not only divided men into "separate communities" but that it "places these communities in a graded order one above the other in social status". According to him, each of these castes "takes its pride and its consolation in the fact that on the scale of castes it is above some other caste" (Ambedkar, 1944: 46).

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ABSTRACT Obwohl Gesetze die Beschäftigung zur manuellen Reinigung von Abwasserkanälen verbieten, ist diese Berufstätigkeit in Indien weit verbreitet. Während es sich einerseits um eine gefährliche und würdelose Tätigkeit handelt, die die manuelle Handhabung von Fäkalien miteinschließt, kann man in ihr andererseits auch eine Form der Diskriminierung aufgrund von Kastenzugehörigkeit erkennen. Die Reinigung von Abwasserkanälen wird in Indien von Angehörigen der niedrigsten Dalit-Kasten – wie u.a. den Bhangis in Ahmedabad – übernommen, die keinen Zugang zu andere Berufen haben und die Hauptlast der Unberührbarkeit tragen. Während SanitärarbeiterInnen, AktivistenInnen, NGOs und Gewerkschaften versuchen, die weite Verbreitung von manueller Abwasserkanalreinigung aufzudecken, leugnen staatliche Stellen weiterhin die Existenz dieser Beschäftigungsform und kastenbasierter Diskriminierung. Der folgende Artikel beschäftigt auf der Grundlage einer Regionalstudie in Ahmedabad damit, wie die oben genannten Akteure die Berufstätigkeit des manuellen Abwasserkanalreinigens sichtbar nach außen tragen, anfechten und neuverhandeln.

Ivan Iyer
ivan.feedstation@gmail.com