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CASTE IN URBAN WASTE MANAGEMENT: FROM CENTRALITY TO DIVERSIFICATION

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Abstract

Caste is central to the basics of urban waste management in India. But the motive behind the caste centrality in the urban waste management has changed from compulsion to choose. The situation has changed because of slow and gradual social, political and economic development. Social mobility, legislative enactment and structural improvement of the job condition have made this possible. Now people from forward castes compete for the low skilled municipal jobs. There is a general tendency to depict the caste diversification and the weakening of the caste centrality as an expected outcome of modernization and social mobility. But it may lead to further exploitation of the Dalits who are within the system for decades.

Keywords: Caste, Waste, Urban, Centrality, Diversification.

I. Introduction

Centrality is one of the important aspects of social network analysis. It basically depicts the origin of strength of a network system. Historically it is observed that caste centrality is prevalent in the ecosystem of urban waste management in India. Even today the so-called polluting work is performed by those more or less constant group of castes such as Valmiki, Chuhra, Bhangi etc. which are broadly grouped as Dalit. Historically the involvement of these castes in the waste management arises as the manifestation of general processes of social stratification. But the very reason of centrality of caste in the said context has gradually changed. Waste management was not a problem in Ancient India. The reason of involvement of oppressed caste in cleaning, sweeping or any other so called dirty works in Medieval India was more social, cultural and religious. During colonial period it was more political decision and in independent India it has gradually become an economic choice to keep their monopoly in the urban waste ecosystem. So, the concept of caste especially in this particular context has been transformed from cultural concept to structural concept.

The present study is an attempt to understand and make an appraisal of the caste centrality in urban waste management in India from historical perspective. It is basically a review study. Various caste specific incidents in the urban waste arena in different parts of the nations in different time periods are critically analyzed. The recent Census data (2011), newspaper reports, different blogs, case histories and available broad literature are used to justify the main ethos of this study. It is structured into six sections. Section II describes the changing nature of urban waste ecosystem from the historical past. The profile of castes involved in the urban waste management is elaborated in the Section III. Section IV details the paradigm shift of compulsion to choose of waste management as a profession. The structural changes that made this shift possible are analyzed in Section V. This change has finally yielded caste diversification and so weakening of the caste centrality in urban waste management. Section VI has outlined the diversification. Section VII has concluded the study.

II. Ecosystem of Urban Waste

Waste is waste because it does not have any use value. So, if there is any possibility of generating some use value out of the waste then it may not be completely waste. Then it will turn into some input to the production process of a desired output. Another important characteristic of waste is that even if we assume that it does not have any use value but equally it has polluting capacity if it is not treated within its life cycle. As the life cycle of the household disposals is very short so it requires timely and just action. The urban waste ecosystem is constructed and deconstructed on the basis of this typical nature of the waste. In the historical past it was just a waste and with the advent of the technology the creation of use value out of the waste is emerged as an industry. Recycling value chain has reduced the volume of waste in this century. But heavy doses of urbanization have also made the management system not only critical but also in some cases unmanageable. Another important economic misnomer associated with the waste management is the notion of considering the service as a public service where entire onus goes to the urban local bodies primarily municipalities at the cost of some nominal amount of fees in terms of tax or any other extra charges. So, to be careful or ought to be careful and making the nation careful about the waste is very difficult as implementation of any punitive measure goes against the spirit of the public nature of the services.

In Ancient India say in Indus Valley Civilization, waste was not a problem because of two reasons. First well-developed drainage system and the low volume. Underground drainage system made of solid bricks connected from houses to the wider public



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drains carried the sewage smoothly and disposed it in a nearby soak pit. The solid residual of the pits was emptied at a regular interval. As the volume was low because of very sparse population density compared to the large city so environment was able to perform as a commensurate sink to the waste.

As the civilization expanded over time with the increase of population waste management has become complex over time. Even in medieval India waste management in urban set up was not a problem as people used to maintain it within their house. Most of the cases household organic disposals such as vegetables residuals, cow dungs etc. were mixed with the mud and converted into compost to be used in agriculture. But the actual problem arises from the increased volume of sewage and its maintenance. Earlier the cities were mostly located at the vicinity of the large river and the sewage was disposed in the river. As the sewage volume was low so river was acted as a natural sink. With the advancement of technology relocation of natural water source such as ocean, large river body etc. had made the expansion of urban centers. Economic activities such as inter-state trade and commerce increased gradually. With this expansion a chaos was introduced in urban management and so in urban waste management. Irregular unplanned structures of horizontal orientation replaced the well-built vertically oriented underground drainage system of Harappa - Mohenjo-Daro. Manual scavenging, caste oppression, pollution of cities is gradually emerged. Environment as a natural sink has failed. In the colonial period British urban planner has tried a little bit. But the situation has become worst during the recent time because of uncontrolled urbanization. The nature of waste has also undergone several changes be in terms of composition as well as volume. Nowadays a significant proportion of urban waste compose of the industrial waste, medical waste and electronic waste. Details of these waste is beyond the scope of this study.

The different stakeholders of urban waste can be broadly classified into three groups: waste generators, waste processors and the institutional set up mainly municipal bodies and other private organization (Visvanathan et al., 2004). If we go by the economic reason then the issue of caste is intricate to the waste processing in relation to the managers of the waste. Social argument for caste centralization comes from the practiced notion of untouchability between the waste generators and the processors. So, the issue of caste in waste management is basically a complex socio-economic interaction among the stakeholders of the waste.

III. Caste Profile in Waste Management

Collection, segregation and finally disposal of household waste is a very low skilled job. Moreover, it is perceived as a polluting activity to the larger society from the onset of the civilization and the stigma with this noble profession is still holding in our society, may or may not be in milder version, even today. So, it is obvious that the laborer who are unskilled will be active in doing these activities. But this unskilled profession is traumatized by the deceit perception of unclean, dingy, frowzy, impure and unholy. Here arises the issue of untouchability. The people who clean our generated waste, who keep our society free from the garbage turned into untouchable because of the gravity of the age-old practice of Caste. The devils of this hierarchy not only alienated these people socially but also from their activities. So called upper caste people termed them as Dalit that is the oppressed group of people. The largest caste within the Dalit is made of by Valmiki/Balmiki the followers of Saint Valmiki, author of Hindu epic Ramayana. Valmiki caste again consists of different group of castes or communities such as Chuhra, Bhangi, Halalkhor, Lal Beghi, Mehtar. These castes almost work as closed group in urban waste management, of course at the bottom of the process in the states of Uttar Pradesh, Haryana, Punjab, Delhi, Gujarat, and the union territory of Chandigarh in North India. Civil Society has politely addressed them as Safaikaramchari. Hadi in West Bengal, Chakliyan in Kerala, Madiga in Karnataka, Hela in Rajasthan, Arunthathiyars in Tamilnadu are some of the other visible castes involved as Safaikaramchari in urban waste management. They also form a closed cluster.

There are some common economic characteristics among those communities which are responsible for making them central to the very low skilled job of waste collection, segregation and finally disposal. Very low level of per capita income, lack of even secondary level of education, high debt obligation, low level of nutrition and lack of skill are the most important economic reasons behind their low social mobility. Low level of family income with the average family size much higher than the national average leads to the debt trap and this debt trap reinforce the low level of income. If we go by the data compiled by the All India Debt and Investment Surveys (AIDIS), National Sample Survey we can see how the economic status of the scheduled caste people in terms of income, consumption and education remained behind the national average for the decades (Figure:1). The contrast becomes sharper if we compared with the so called forward caste (FC). This economic backwardness leads to the social immobility and social exclusion. India ranks very badly in the recently prepared The Global Social Mobility Report, 2020 by World Economic Forum (WEF, 2020). India got the 76th position as per the Global Social Mobility Index, 2020 among the 86 nations surveyed globally.

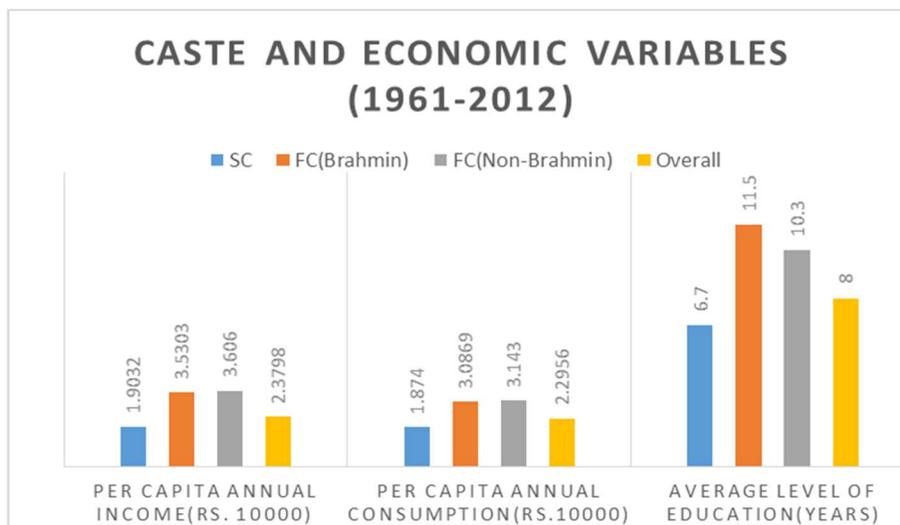
Figure: 1. Caste and Economic Variables



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Data Source: All India Debt and Investment Surveys (AIDIS), National Sample Survey, 2018

The poor performance of SCs and the STs both in the social and economic front is responsible for this performance. The prevalence of the economic backwardness has reduced somehow due to state intervention. The impacts of state intervention are discussed in separate section. Among the scheduled caste people, the communities which are engaged in the urban waste management are the most marginalised. We don't have any all-India level survey on that except some regional level survey to calculate the numbers of manual scavengers.

IV. From Compulsion to Choose

There is no doubt that the working condition in the urban waste management has changed with the adoption of new-age practices. Nowadays there is competition within the closed group of caste mentioned earlier. The perceived societal notion of compulsion to join in the urban waste management as a consequence of birth in the low hierarchical group has mostly replaced as a self-choice because of a number of positive developments in this sphere. Of course, choice not as depicted by Durkheim (1893) but as mentioned by Pareto (1971). The young generation of the prevailing caste is migrating from their origin mostly from North India are migrating to the South to join in the work of garbage collection of the large municipalities. They also move to the newly built and upcoming large cities for these jobs and form their own cluster along the periphery of the large cities. They always keep and maintain the distance from the locals not just because of the mere feelings of social alienation but because of maintaining their cast centrality for the jobs. The motivational changes revealed in their preference for the jobs floated by the large municipalities. The movement of members of Balmiki communities from Uttar Pradesh to Kerala or the Hadis from the Jharkhand to West Bengal are some of the notable migrations for the municipality's jobs during the recent decade. They keep close contact among the members and inform their relatives whenever there is any opportunity develops. Arunthathiyars in Tamil Nadu are mainly migrating community. Caste centrality is strengthened with these motivational changes.

V. Positive Changes to Strengthen Centrality

Choice has emerged in the urban waste management among the existing caste certainly because of several positive changes during the last two decades. Social, political and economic changes have made the transition from the compulsion to choose within the existing caste group. Society has moved from the days of 'untouchable' to 'friend request'. Social mobility is an outcome of education for all, same wage for same work, unique identification irrespective of caste, class, religion and of course the equality in the social media space. The son of the person who is engaged in the cleaning of the urban sewage can go to school and sit with the other forward castes. The contractual municipal sewage workers now can demand comparable competitive wage because of their organizational power. He can stand on the same queue with the other forward castes people to get the unique identification. Nobody can resist the person from commenting on a political or social issue within the social media. These sense of equality and inclusion have changed the motivation. The very reason of caste centrality in the urban waste ecosystem of social exclusion has been challenged because of the social mobility. Caste is central to the mammoth task of keeping your city clean with more dignity considering the task as another job. Of course, there is still enormous amount of risk, health hazard and consequent death associated with the task but the age-old perceived notion of polluting activity is no more within the urban society at least at its old crude form.



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The growing concentration and contact (Karve, 1959) among the members within and outside the caste, cohesive force, and strength of the network and finally the height of the exploitation resulted into formation of platforms for agitation, slogan and legal battle. The 'Safai Karmachari Andolon' led by Karnataka born waste-picker turned social activist and 2016 Raman Magsaysay award winner, Bezwada Wilson was perhaps the oldest organized movement in this context. So of late state has paid some heed to these oppressed castes realizing their numbers and organizing power and come with legislative measures. Subsequent to this movement The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993 was passed in the parliament. It was made more stringent with the passing of The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013. Government has further proposed to introduce an amendment to this act, The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation (Amendment) Bill, 2020, in ongoing Monsoon Session of Parliament to make it more stringent and broader based. Needless to say, that the political empowerment has turned the preference more choice based than the compulsion.

Economic changes provided the basis of structural changes of the changing caste issue while social and political changes are responsible for the normative contests. Economic changes have made the actual positive turnaround story in the urban waste management system. The working condition of the waste pickers has improved because of adoption of some degree of mechanization such as collection of waste using motorized van, segregation of waste using bulk handling segregator. Mechanization has not only reduced the notion of polluting stigma with the waste picking but also has made the job less labour intensive. Such an advancement acts as an impetus to remain in this job for the communities.

Benefit in terms of regular wage, one-time fixed retirement benefit, medical expenditure allowance for on-site accident is some of the important supports which have motivated the young generation from the closed group of communities to move to the cities such as Gurugram, Noida, Gaziabad, Surat, Pune to join the inform municipal job of waste collection, segregation and disposal. Daily wage and other benefits differ from one municipality to others in the same state or in different states. A family of waste pickers earned about Rs. 8,000-12,000 a month before the lockdown (Mistry, 2020). There is a long demand for a minimum wage and making the job permanent. But still the demands are in the paper as proposal form. There are very few instances where minimum wage act is effective after a long battle against the administration. One such example is the waste pickers of the Kagad, Kach, Patra Kashtakari Panchayat of Pimpri Chinchwad Municipality of Pune have succeeded to get the minimum wage after two years long public protests and legal processes in 2015 (Dala, 2015).

Another interesting development is the availability of other secondary works to these poorly skilled labour force, such as working as a security guard in an apartment or nursing home during the night. The additional income from the secondary work makes their family income somehow decent to live. They feel their present waste handling portfolio as a safe and secured job. So nowadays it is not just a destiny rather it is the continuation of the baton because of some capacity constraint. We have seen intergenerational social mobility in many instances. A son of a sweeper may not be a sweeper in future. At least state has come forward with its allocation for the capacity enhancement of the scheduled castes in the form of skill impartment, low interest loan or loan waiver for a new business. Having a bank account which is commonly termed as the bank ki khata has tried to disseminate the sense of financial inclusion to these financially fragile community. As a consequence, they are still at the core of waste management to strengthen their network.

VI. Caste Diversification in Waste Management

So far situation has changed a lot. Untouchability is now not in practice, may be in mind. Diversification comes into the picture weakening the historical centrality of caste in the waste management. The state government of Rajasthan has advertised for the recruitment of sanitation workers (street cleaners) mentioning the preference for the Valmiki and Hela communities in the year 2012 (Jain, 2020). But the preference was contested in the court by the forward castes on demand of reservation for other castes as per the constitutional provisions. When the result of the recruitment has come out in 2018, a large number of candidates from upper castes were in the list. The phenomenon is common during the recent time in many other states also. Not only in waste management, is this seen in other low skilled caste dominated job also. This may lead to the weakening of the caste centrality (Béteille, 2000; Mohanty, 2007). There is a tendency to depict this transformation as a positive transformation from a closed system of hierarchy to an open system of social stratification (Jodhka, 2015). But it may be an implication to a social process. It may lead to further oppression to the lower caste people in the name of competition. Privatization and mechanization for 100 percent reuse may make these people redundant in future and so the use of the present study.



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VII. Conclusion

So, there is no doubt that still caste is central to the basics of urban waste management in India. After the situation analysis of the news events published in the electronic media during the last two decades and going through the existing literature the paper comes into the conclusion that the motive behind the caste centrality in the urban waste management has changed from compulsion to choose. The situation has changed because of slow and gradual social, political and economic development. Social mobility, legislative enactment and structural improvement of the job condition have made this possible. Now people from forward castes compete for the low skilled municipal jobs. There is a general tendency to depict the caste diversification and the weakening of the caste centrality as an expected outcome of modernization and social mobility. But it may lead to further exploitation of the Dalits who are within the system for decades.

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