

Sanitation Workers in India During Covid-19 Pandemic: *Another Corona Warrior*

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Organised by



Background

The lockdown during the Covid-19 pandemic witnessed an unprecedented baulk in all kinds of work on one hand and highlighted the essentiality of healthcare, relief-care and sanitation work on the other. From day one of the lockdown sanitation work was categorised as essential service and sanitation workers have continued to clean our neighbourhoods, public spaces, sewer lines, drainages, onsite septic tanks, etc. In recent time, several policy measures have been initiated by the government. However, a discernible improvement in the lives and working conditions of over five million sanitation workers would require translation of these policy initiatives into concrete actions. The Covid-19 pandemic and its indiscriminate spread across the country has made the lives of sanitation workers even more perilous and uncertain.

In this pandemic time, many sanitation workers lacked information about the personal hygiene and personal protective equipment. More generally, a large section of them, being outsourced and contracted, continued to suffer from wage insecurity, inadequate or no health insurance, and terrible mental agony. In India, sanitation work being largely caste-based, the workers face atrocious discrimination in the society. The women sanitation workers, who constitute half of the

sanitation work force, often face gender-based discriminations including sexual harassments.

In recent time, a new public and policy consciousness is emerging to support the rights of sanitation workers by providing them a safe and dignified work and a work-life balance. In addition to highlighting the issues related to personal safety from occupational hazards and ensuring fair and regular wages/compensation, the re-skilling of sanitation workers is getting prominence in the discourse and practice. However, this requires massive scaling up and institutionalisation across the country.

PRIA International Academy (PIA), Water Aid India and India Sanitation Coalition (ISC) came together to organise an online roundtable dialogue on 27 May 2020. Shubhagato Dasgupta from Centre for Policy Research (CPR), Shashi Shikha from Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA), V.R Raman from Water Aid, Meghna Malhotra from Urban Management Centre (UMC) and Kavita Wankhade from Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) were the key presenters and shared their perspectives based on their current work on the issue. Moderated by Dr Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay of PRIA, the dialogue was held amongst 37 key representatives from *civil society, policy makers, academia, think tank, media and social businesses*. The purpose of the dialogue was to generate constructive and feasible

solutions to the issues of sanitation workers, particularly in the aftermath of Covid-19 pandemic.

The dialogue attempted to deliberate upon the following questions:

- What are the key difficulties and challenges faced by the sanitation workers during the Covid-19 pandemic?
- How can the urban local bodies (ULBs) and local administration in partnership with other actors ensure effective dissemination of information and training related to personal safety and hygiene and general precautions about the pandemic covering all sanitation workers?
- How ULBs and local administration can ensure supply, distribution, and use of personal protective equipment to sanitation workers?
- What kind of accountability mechanisms must be enforced to guarantee the rights of sanitation workers?
- What are the various social support and welfare measures that the sanitation workers and their families are provided with, during this pandemic? Are there any gaps in these?
- What role the civil society, corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes, academia and other stakeholders can play to support the sanitation workers, ULBs and local administration?

Key Takeaways

- *The mobilisation and organisation building of sanitation workers must be given priority. The intermediary agencies can facilitate the interface between sanitation workers and employer institutions, the representation, voice and agency of sanitation workers must be nurtured and strengthened.*
- *The central and state governments need to enforce the existing regulatory mechanisms including laws and policies related to sanitation work and workers and must ensure periodic assessment of their efficacy. A combination of legal, technological and social interventions must be undertaken at a massive scale to alleviate the work-life balance of sanitation*

workers with a particular emphasis on women sanitation workers.

- *A comprehensive behaviour change communication strategy needs to be mounted to change the mindset of society at large with respect to sanitation work and sanitation workers. This needs to be rolled out with impetus from the central and state governments and commitment to implement through decentralised governance systems in a long-term manner.*
- *The ULBs need to take full cognisance, responsibility, and action to ensure safety, dignity and rights of the sanitation workers. This includes the responsibility of the ULBs to hold the private contractors accountable.*
- *There is a need to develop a facilitative and enabling mechanism for sanitation workers and their family members to access all the government schemes and provisions for long term change. This mechanism should be simple enough to be inclusive but also robust enough to cover all kinds of sanitation workers.*

Highlights of Presentations

Setting the context of the webinar *Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay* who moderated the discussion pointed out that in the recent past a new public consciousness has emerged to support sanitation workers. Inception of SBM has helped in building this new consciousness. However, visible improvement in the lives of sanitation workers will require concrete actions from government institutions, local governments, policy makers, CSOs as well as organisations of the sanitation workers, especially in the time of Covid-19. There is still a lot that needs to be done to ensure safety, dignity and rights of the sanitation workers because of their specific socio-demographic background. He urged the participants to generate concrete ideas and plan of action to address these issues both immediately and in long term.

Shubhagato Dasgupta presented the findings from a short study conducted with 17 sanitation workers in 10 Indian cities to understand the occupational

and socio-economic vulnerabilities of sanitation workers during the pandemic lockdown. He highlighted that there are at least nine different kinds of employment conditions where sanitation workers are either directly employed by the ULBs, or by an intermediary organisation such as CSOs as service provider agencies or market-based mechanism where the workers are unlicensed and have no interface with the ULBs. Based on the nature of their employment their vulnerabilities also differ and is extenuated if they are daily wage workers with the ULBs, subcontracted by RWAs or franchised by a private contractor. He revealed that those workers employed with the ULBs have been found to be aware of their role as emergency workers. However, those who are privately employed face restrictions on their movement by police and suffer from income insecurity. He further explained that up to 90 percent of the sanitation workforce do not have any interface with the ULBs and therefore the new impetus created by central and state governments despite giving visibility to the issue are unable to give any respite to them. Those working with ULBs have been supplied with basic protective gears and training on Covid-19 and are eligible for the new health benefits but do not apply to all other categories of workers. Sanitation workers and their nature of employment have been impacted with greater emphasis on private sector and contracting out class four jobs. Although SBM created provisions for them not much has really changed.

There is a need to look at why the policies and programmes have not had desired impact on the condition of sanitation workers. He concluded by suggesting the need to unbundle sanitation work into various components and mapping the stakeholders within the framework of location and contractual arrangements to pinpoint the vulnerabilities owing to institutional arrangements. He called for a comprehensive strategy to look at the issue and need for interventions by the central and state governments to take concrete actions.

Shashi Shikha built upon the participatory research conducted with sanitation workers in the cities of Ajmer, Jhansi and Muzaffarpur in the year 2018 and a brief study conducted with 15 sanitation workers from the same cities and Faridabad during the lockdown. She highlighted

that the current period of pandemic has given visibility to the essential nature of work that the sanitation workers perform. However, naming and renaming them since the advent of SBM as swachhata grahi/sevak/sainik and as 'warriors' during the Covid-19 seems to burden them with an agency and perceived significance that is limited to their relentless working and not to alleviate any of their specific problems which have existed nevertheless. The extensive media coverage has highlighted the issues of sanitation workers but it has also exposed our institutions and government functions of how easily they are kept at margins. Death of sanitation chief at AIIMs is a telling apathy that is met to them as a whole section of workers. The sanitation workers employed with ULBs have been given masks and gloves as PPE which were due even in a non-pandemic situation. The masks are also substandard and not provided regularly to these workers. Similar is the case with sanitisers and soaps. The workers are not given adequate training on handling of waste during the Covid-19, awareness on the exact nature of the pandemic and types of precautions that they must take and even now they mostly depend on their own network to get the information. There is no effort to conduct regular screening of these workers for any possible infection rather they are being given tokenistic prevention such as distribution of lemons in the Muzaffarpur Municipal Corporation. The health compensations being announced by the different state governments (such as 40 lakh in Rajasthan and 1 crore in Delhi) in event of death due to Covid is a reflection of the helplessness of the state if the workers collectively abandon performing their tasks due to pandemic fear. All kinds of worker issues such as workplace safety, health insurance, delayed wages, inadequate wages, social discrimination have remained and rather exacerbated during this pandemic.

There however, seems to be an acknowledgement of their services as essential by state governments and the Supreme Court that has raised questions to the central government on how they are ensuring their protection. There has been rise in individual philanthropic activities to assist the workers and increase in sensitisation amongst middle class on the significance of their work. She appealed that the smaller changes at individual

level might lead to societal changes in future. Hence, each one of us must segregate waste at home and try to reach out the workers to enquire about their well-being and assist them to access government schemes wherever applicable.

V R Raman and Meghna Malhotra shared their insights from an ongoing joint study by the Water Aid and Urban Management Centre covering 11 states. The study focusses on understanding how various guidelines issued by institutions like the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB), Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs (MoHUA), Central Public Health and Environmental Engineering Organisation (CPHEEO) and various state governments are being implemented with regards to health and safety of sanitation workers. Secondly, it tries to understand knowledge, practices and concerns of sanitation workers with regards to these schemes and provisions. Thirdly, it tries to gauge the working conditions and support measures available for sanitation workers. The study looks at six categories of sanitation workers that include door to door waste collectors, hospitals and quarantine facility sanitation workers, public toilets cleaners, drains, sewers and dry latrine cleaners and rag pickers. Reiterating the findings from CPR, they informed that the sanitation workers employed by the municipalities have been provided with the PPE kits, however, contract workers have not been provided that kind of support. In Telangana workers have been provided with handwashing stations and soaps. Regular supply of safety and hygiene kits remains to be seen. Workers have reported thermal screening once in two weeks. However, there seems to be lack of formal testing and screening for workers and adequate support in cases of deaths. The discrimination of these workers continues in the society. A lot of privately employed workers have suffered wage losses especially the manual scavengers due to lockdown and restrictions on movement.

They emphasised that the ULBs need to look at contract management of the sanitation workers as well as ensure regular supply of safety measures and health coverage.

Kavita Wankhade shared the findings from a rapid assessment of 45 sanitation workers (both

employed by ULB and contractual) aged between 20-40 years in the cities of Coimbatore and Trichy. The study found that many sanitation workers have been provided with PPE on a one-time basis but its quality is poor. They have also received sanitisers and soaps. Most of the workers have accessed benefits from the PDS and cash support of Rs.1000 from the Government of Tamil Nadu. Of the 40 schemes for sanitation workers they have received benefits from three, particularly because of lack of requisite documents which is difficult to get in the current situation of lockdown. The workers are facing difficulties of transportation with complete disruption of public transport and work opportunities for informal workers have become bleak. They are facing irregular wage payment and lack of support in catering to red zones. They are facing discrimination in apartment complexes and amongst their neighbours as they are treated as bearers of infection. The study also brought to light the perpetual fear of irregular finances, inflation and inability to pay debts. Their need is to gain financial security, increase in wages, easy access to loans, and job security.

Open Discussion

A number of eminent practitioners, researchers and functionaries shared their views on the issue which could be categorised into the issues related to sanitation work and workers, problems of contractual employment, caste-based discrimination and inadequacy of existing policies and programmes.

Sanitation work and workers

- It was emphasised that we still do not have a good understanding of the risk registers of various kinds of sanitation work because of which we tend to use 'sanitation workers' as an umbrella term for all kinds of work related to public cleanliness. Women sanitation workers and waste pickers remain invisible in the sanitation chain. Self-employed workers have lost job opportunities due to lockdown.
- PPEs are not easy to wear and work with which has been flagged before pandemic as

well. There is a need to provide better quality and comfortable PPEs.

- RWAs must take responsibility for ensuring safety and precautionary measures of sanitation workers.
- The sanitation workers must be given facilities such as work breaks and safe and dignified work place features. In present times they should be provided access to same quarantine facilities as is being provided to other frontline workers.
- There is a need to make more space for the sanitation workers to amplify their voices and put forward their needs rather than us (the experts).
- The sanitation workers have been successful in bargaining with the municipalities that have been responded positively due to their close working relationships.
- Sanitation workers lack in self-confidence. They need to be federated and formed into groups such as SHGs to make their voices heard.
- Children of sanitation workers are the most vulnerable. There is a need to prioritise their needs especially education to prevent them from being school dropouts.

Problems of Contractual Employment

- A large number of sanitation workers are contractually employed and are worst hit with lack of minimum wages, irregular payments and absence of any health insurance. Their issues need to be focussed upon beyond the pandemic. Women sanitation workers are further affected as they are in perpetual risk of losing their jobs, financial corruption and sexual harassment by contractors.
- Some of the discussants were of the opinion that all sanitation workers must be regularised and we need to resist the normalisation of contractual employment model. Others advocated that the worker's safety should be ensured by evaluating the eligibility of the contractors based on their ability to provide PPE, health insurance, compensation in events of accidents or deaths. It was pointed out that Covid could be a good starting point

for the market to include sanitation workers in the ambit of insurance coverage.

- All the municipal corporations suffer from cash crunch and inadequate funding support that in turn impacts the ways in which employment conditions are met out at the ULB level. This factor also needs to be considered before proposing strategies.
- It was suggested that one could look at Madhari model of Maharashtra which is a self-sustaining model to formalise the workers and ensure regular income without any support of government funds.

Caste Based Discrimination

- In the recent times there seems to be an increased realisation on the significance of sanitation work and workers, however, discrimination due to entrenched caste system would not go away merely because their services are needed.
- It was suggested that the term 'physical distancing' should be used in place of 'social distancing' as the latter has negative implications and caste embeddedness.
- There is a need for behavioural and mindset change within communities with respect to how we treat the different categories of workers.

Policy and Programmes

- It was highlighted that sanitation workers have not been categorically acknowledged in policies and remain neglected.
- Despite a lot of advocacy, little has changed for sanitation workers at the ULB level. There is a need to incentivise ULBs and district administrations for providing care for workers and raising awareness amongst them. Provisions in Swachh Survekshan should be included and assessment should also include the status of workers in the ULBs.
- All reforms that have been talked about are essential to alleviate the existing working conditions of the workers and providing them long term relief to face crises or pandemics in future.
- The responsibility of providing sanitation is with the state and local governments. There must

be planning and enforcement from the central government to state government for resources. A need assessment should be undertaken on how many people are required in the sanitation work and what kind of financial resources and expertise are required.

Closing Remarks

Meenakshi Dewan of India Sanitation Coalition suggested that we need to revisit whether we are doing enough to orient sanitation workers during the current pandemic. We need to look at the quality of PPE being given to them and whether or not their health check-ups including screening and testing for the Covid infection is being satisfactorily done and at regular intervals. She also recommended that the campaigns around sanitation worker's practices must be initiated including creation of relevant IEC materials.

V.K. Madhavan of Water Aid reflected that sanitation workers are enmeshed in the vicious cycle of gender, caste, and class and many attempts for their rehabilitation including developing alternate skills have had limited results. Manual scavenging has remained despite

Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013. Hence, there is a need to look at aspects of education and skill development of sanitation workers and their families. The experience suggest that legal recourse has not worked much in case of sanitation workers and therefore we have to look at multiple options including technology that will ensure health and safety for sanitation workers and also enable them to become owners of the capital for long term change.

Rajesh Tandon of PRIA concluded the discussion by proposing the need for developing mechanisms for mandatory registration of workers unmediated by contractors and sub-contractors. He emphasised for a systemic attention on the issues of the workers and focus on their awareness generation, skill building and collectivisation not just for demanding their rights but renegotiating their rights. He beseeched that none of the children of sanitation workers want to be involved in the same profession but because of the caste and social dynamic they are not able to venture out into new vocations. One needs to reflect on helping change the situation.