

Subhuman Conditions of Life Prevailing for the Underclass Workers in India

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Abstract—Underclass workers are those who have no fortune of getting enrolled into muster of sweepers, artisans, loaders etc. as regular employees and as such work anywhere on daily wage on pick up basis from a job hustler point in any town. Not only in India but all over the world including USA the underclass workers exist and survive sheer by virtue of their physical labour power. According to the Report of the National Commission on Enterprises in the Unorganized Sector (NCEUS) about 90% of the workforce in India is toiling in the unorganized sector getting lesser wages than legally declared Minimum wage. Contract Labour is found in certain activities in the unorganized sector such as in stone quarrying, beedi rolling, rice shelling and brick kiln. Underclass workers are found doing dangerous work on daily or hourly basis of lowering themselves in manholes filled with methane, ammonia and hydrogen sulfide gases. In India after the adoption of Globalization, Contract Labour Regulation Act 1970 has been amended thrice and is in the process of fourth amendment which would thus reduce the benefits accruing to labour. This is going to make them more vulnerable to fatigue, occupational diseases and occupational deaths. Right now eighty workers die in India every day due to occupational hazards. This paper is an attempt to bring to light the subhuman and hazardous conditions of life of underclass workers and also focus on the causes of the same.

Keywords: subhuman condition, underclass workers, decent work deficit, lumpen proletariat.

1. INTRODUCTION

The **underclass** is that segment of the population which occupies the lowest possible position in a class hierarchy. Underclass workers are placed below the core body of the working class who get legal Minimum Wage declared by the Government and also get all protection as workers viz limited working hours, paid weekly holiday, provident fund contribution from the employer, paid maternity leave for female workers, toilet and washing facility at work site, uniform, protective shoes and helmet etc. The underclass workers are not getting any of these facilities. Unorganized sector employs vast number of underclass workers who are underpaid and overworked at the same time. The life is just hell for them. They have no decent dwelling house, no piped water, no sanitary bloc comprising a clean toilet and bath room. The dwellings are made of tinne roof and walls of bamboo mats or jute gunny bags. These people do not have

bed and blankets and do not have any kitchen with cooking gas stove. The children do not have access to education. The children of underclass workers get scanty or no schooling and they too have to work for their daily bread.

2. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The objectives of the study are as follows:

1. To understand the meaning of underclass workers.
2. To understand the meaning of decent work deficit.
3. To bring to light the subhuman and hazardous conditions of life of underclass workers.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

The study is purely descriptive based on the secondary data and observations of the researcher.

4. LITERATURE REVIEW:

The general idea that a class system includes a population under and below the working class has a long tradition in the social sciences. Marx called the underclass workers as lumpen-proletariat. But the connotation of the word lumpen-proletariat was negative meaning that the unemployable vagabonds In the United States of America at least 60 % working population comprises of underclass workers who are mostly black workers and who stand in the morning at a pick up point where many casual workers stand expecting some house owner to ask them if they are ready to work for 20-30 dollars for day. The minimum wage in America for an unskilled worker is 7.25 dollars per hour. Whatever may the GDP figure, if underclass workers are present in a country that country must be ranked as having lowest level of well-being.

5. DISCUSSION

Impact of Structural Adjustment Program.

In 1990, when the slogan of Globalization was given by Congress Government led by Prime Minister P.V. Narshimha Rao the key figure in implementing SAP (Structural Adjustment Program) was Dr. Manmohan Singh the then

Finance Minister. As the fact goes India is one of the biggest borrowers of the Bretton Woods institutions viz. World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. The IMF and The World bank saw all developing countries including India as having economic instability due to trade deficits and huge current account deficits. The SAP consisted of schemes like privatization of all public sector industries starting with some disinvestment. Reducing permanent regular workers in all public sector industries and employing contract labor instead. World Bank called this as “reducing fat”. Globalization meant stabilizing economy by destabilizing country’s work force. Irony of the SAP was that it protected bureaucracy and devastated the industrial workers. Hundreds of industrial units retrenched several lakhs of workers and then by back door recruited contract labor. This type of labor is recruited through the labor contractor who sends them to work in industrial unit on low pay and no facility. Even workmen’s compensation in case of injury is not accessible to the unfortunate contract labor. From this contractualization emerged the underclass work force.

Feudalism revived

Feudal Lords in Great Britain Viz. Dukes, Earls, Barons had vast stretches of land in their name. They also had authority to direct any persons to behave in certain way. The person if refused was punished severely. The Feudal Lords used to threaten their subjects with punishment and extracted work from peasants and farm labor at abysmally low wage. After Industrial Revolution (1760) industry proliferated (1760-1840).¹ The Feudal Lords became industry owners since they had money to invest. Bristol, Glasgow, Manchester and Sheffield became industrial cities. There too the Land Lords turned industrialists paid low wages to workers. Robert Owen was an exception who regarded workers in his factory as real owners.² India being the colony of England for nearly 300 years rich Indian presumed themselves to be feudal lords ; therefore it is not surprising that Indian employer had the same culture of exploiting the labor and treating the labor as worthless. In India’s composite textile mills (1850-1950) the workers were paid as low as one rupee per day. They (permanent workers were provided dwelling houses by the employers which were no better than animal cages. The underclass workers in textile industry were “badi kamgars” (substitute workers) who visited the factory gate every day and given job if some regular workers areas absent due to sickness etc. Many workers remained as badli kamgars for as long as for 20 years. Badli kamgar was reckoned as underclass.worker.in textile industry. During 1980s there were 2, 25,000 textile mill workers in Mumbai out of which 45,000 were badli workers.³

The Death Trap

Underclass workers are lured in to a death trap by contractors and the regular permanent workers of Electricity Boards, Municipal Corporations and Co-operative Sugar Mills. And

Spinning Mills etc. In Maharashtra State Electricity Board in virtually every state across the country, deaths of casually hired linemen occur with shocking regularity putting a huge question mark over safety procedures for these foot soldiers who quite literally put their life on the line to ensure a seamless power supply to our homes and offices when the line men themselves are not permanent workers eligible for massive compensation. The casually hired linemen are underclass workers who are hired by contractors on daily basis. The story of Shanker Jadhav will throw light on what actually goes on with the lives of underclass workers.

In Municipal Corporations across the whole country thousands of underclass workers have died while repairing underground sewer lines. The killer mix of methane, ammonia, carbon dioxide and sulphur penta oxide is emitting from sludge of human excreta urine and other decaying waste material. The regular permanent workers hire casual underclass workers to enter manhole of choked sewer line for a daily wage ranging between Rs.200 and Rs.300. The ignorant underclass worker does not know that he might die by lowering himself in sewer filled with poisonous gases emitting from sludge comprising human excreta, urine, hospital waste dead rats and rodents’ sand and mud.

Human Rights activist and writer from Gudalur Tamilnadu India **Mari Marcel Thekaekara**⁴ writes that in the developed countries, manhole workers are provided bunny suits and respiratory apparatus. In Hong Kong, a sewer worker needs to have 15 licenses (permits) in order to enter a manhole. In India, conservancy workers mostly from the balmiki sub caste of dalits (and the mahar caste dalits and Muslim wet sweepers from Maharashtra) enter the sewer manhole almost naked with a narrow strip of cloth around private parts. The mortality rate amongst them is appallingly high. According to Rohit Nigam (Software Engineer) extrapolated number of deaths of sanitation workers across India, may be estimated to be 22327 every year. The tragedy is that the dying person being casual workers from the underclass their next of kins are not considered eligible for compensation for death on duty nor is anyone considered for a regular job on compassionate ground.

Such high death rate of dalits employed in sanitation work brings Indian bureaucrats to shame who were unable to see such malady in spite of repeated insertion of news by media in the news papers and Magazines. **Tehelka magazine** has brought out a special issue with title “**Dying in Gutters**”⁵ to attract attention of top bureaucrats. Ms. Mari Marcel Thekaekara laments that almost every day in some newspaper the sad news appears with a caption “sweeper dies in manhole” but the readers skip the page to other interesting news as if death of a dalit is not worth of wasting reading time even a few minutes. Ms.Thekaekara also states that as per a report prepared by International Dalit Solidarity Network in 2002 there are one million scavengers in India who annually lift the human excreta in buckets and walk a distance of 1 kilometer on an average. We abhor human excreta contact or

even smell from a distance but the fate of some one million dalits is that whole of their lives they are carrying dirty foul smelling fecal matter on their heads or shoulders.

Dr. Krantikumar Sharma, a social scientist and also, a Human Rights activist says that we must all thank John Harington (1561-1612) for inventing flush toilet and also Thoman Crapper (1836-110) for refining the flush toilet. These two great persons gave riddance to humanity from the scourge of carrying human excreta on heads and shoulders. Dr. Sharma further says that Bezwada Wilson who organized SKA (Safai Karmachari Andolan) did a great job by pressurizing Government to ban manual scavenging and making it punishable to force some do manual scavenging.

6. CONCLUSION

On the bases of random personal interviews of workers in unorganized sector; especially the underclass workers and the media reports and observation of the authoress of this paper it can be safely concluded that these workers who form major chunk of India's workforce do not get minimum wage and do not get work with sustainable regularity to enable them and their dependents eat balanced diet with minimum nutrition required. PEM protein energy malnutrition was rampant among the families of these workers since pulses, meat; eggs are out of their reach. Many in these families are surviving with chronic hunger and rampant malnutrition discernible clearly by their frail underweight. Occupational diseases like chronic obstructive pulmonary diseases COPD due to dust and suspended particles in air inhaled at workplace and residence of these workers in slum are common. Several water borne diseases like gastro enteritis cholera and typhoid attack them since these workers have no access to clean water. Malnutrition and residence in inhabitable places affect the bodies of these workers and their families.

Most tragic is the fact that due to poverty and chronic hunger the underclass workers accept dangerous work for unfair low paltry wage like lowering themselves in sewers and climbing on electric poles to correct line fault. In sewers the methane gas (CH₄) Amonia (NH₃) and Hydrogen sulfide (H₂S)

together choke the worker to death. The railway gangmen who push gravel under rails often die under fast trains on bends. Construction workers are neither provided industrial shoes nor yellow industrial helmets. Sweepers are not provided shoes and gloves and disposable masking strips to get protection from bacteria e-coli and other spectra.

ILO calls this as decent work deficit.⁶ India has huge fiscal deficit due to which real wages are continuously falling but what worries ILO is the colossal decent work deficit under which India's work force is crumbling⁷.

While decent work captures many of the preoccupations in high-income countries, it is also a way of expressing the goals of development in human terms. It is about improvements in the quality of people's lives: this means not only their incomes through fair wages and consumption, but also through improvement in their capacity to realize their aspirations. This is also a way of stating a development goal which is valid in all countries and for all who work in them.

Nobel laureate Amartya Sen, whose lecture at the 1999 session of the International Labour Conference addressed these very issues, has expressed the goal of development as expanding the capabilities of people and so increasing their freedoms. Poverty is seen as the deprivation of these capabilities and freedoms. Martha Nussbaum has taken these ideas further by looking at human capabilities through a gender lens.

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