

Anatomy of an Inhuman Form of Protest by Bhangis to Assert their Human Dignity against Social Discrimination

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On July 20, 2010, several members of the Bhangi community in Savanur (Haveri District, Karnataka) smeared human excreta on themselves in front of the Municipal Administrator's office protesting against the Municipality's plan to evict them from their dwellings. They have been living there since eight decades. Bhangi, is a sub-caste of Madigas, the community which has been treated as untouchables and form part of the Safai Karmacharis who do manual scavenging cleaning the dry latrines. What seemed like a unique protest of *inhuman* form unravels various streams of indignity and inhumanity experienced by the Bhangis, one of the lowest even among Dalits. This case study is prepared on the basis of the fact-finding report that was done by a team of civil society organizations.

Background of the Bhangi Community and Incident

Savanur is a small Municipality town located 24 km away from Haveri district headquarters about 300 km from Bangalore. Savanur was ruled by Nawab Abdul Majid Khan II till Independence who granted land to the Bhangi community on which they could build their houses. From the days of the Nawab, these families have been working as manual scavengers in the town of Savanur. Post-independence, the Government did not issue land rights to this community, but never interfered with their enjoyment of this property. Savanur has grown over the years, and the place where Bhangi families live has now become the centre of the town and is a prime property.

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The Town Municipality in a special meeting on Nov 23, 2009 decided to construct a commercial complex on the property where the Bhangi families lived declaring the Bhangis as unauthorized occupants. Even those Bhangis who worked as sweepers were kept in the dark about the decision of the Municipality. Soon the officials and councilors began harassing the community in order to vacate the place. The last attempt in this sequence of events was stopping water supply to the colony.

The panic-stricken Bhangi families, on the advice of Dalit organizations and other well-wishers, gave a written memorandum to the Regional Commissioner, Belgaum Revenue Division, on Jan 8, 2010, complaining against the unilateral and deliberate decision of the Municipality to dislocate their families. He sent direction to the officers in-charge to look into the issues mentioned in the memorandum and take action as per law, with an instruction to inform the complainants about the action. The Bhangi families did not receive any letter nor any instruction and the harassment continued in different forms.

On July 17, 2010, the Municipality disconnected the water connection to the Bhangi colony without giving any notice in writing. The Bhangis met the Assistant Commissioner with a memorandum giving details of the nature and the extent of threats, atrocities and discrimination. The memorandum specially pointed out that there was no other source of water as they were not allowed to draw water from public taps because of being untouchables. The Assistant Commissioner was impatient and he rather insisted that they pay Rs. 2000/- to restore the water connections .

On 20th July 2010 members of the Bhangi colony gathered in front of the Municipality office bringing with them buckets of human excreta which they clean every day. In front of the media and the public they smeared human excreta on themselves as a protest against the inhuman treatment and atrocity meted out to them.

Officials of the Municipality were indifferent and refused to receive their memorandum, which was later submitted to the Tahsildar. The protest was covered extensively by both State and national electronic/print media and exposed the inhuman treatment given to the Bhangi community.

Resorting to an extreme form of inhuman and non-violent (?) protest had its impact as it shamed the Government which has denied the existence of any form of manual scavenging in the State of Karnataka. The protest against the exploitation of Dalits, manual scavengers and Safai Karmacharis took place all over the State with many thinkers and writers denouncing the apathy of the State Government. The enormous amount of public pressure that was built up soon after the event forced the Government to do something – to save their face immediately.

Major Post-Protest Socio-Political Developments

A small community of powerless Bhangis, the voiceless even among Dalits caught the imagination of the national media due to the nature of their protest. The State Government filed an affidavit in the Supreme Court and also issued a statement in the Parliament that there is no manual scavenging in Karnataka. As part of the face-saving measures, two emergency meetings were held chaired by the local MLA to defuse the tension: it was decided not to evict Bhangis from the present place till alternative arrangements were made, and allot sites and construct houses in already formulated Ashraya plots for all 13 families; to provide basic amenities in the area; to provide employment to recruit nine persons from the Bhangi community in the existing 13 vacant permanent sanitation worker positions in the Municipality; to provide scholarship to all school-going children with assurance of two acres of land for each of these families along with access to loans.

The Government officials and ruling party leaders were trying to “manage” the issue in order to cover up the injustice done by taking the Bhangis to hospital, pressuring them not to give

negative statements, providing food, enticing them with various letters of assurance, arranging a special meeting for them with the Minister. The Municipality President called the incident as an unfortunate one, he suspected the Bhangis were influenced and were misguided by political conspiracy to bring a bad name to his Municipality. He and other elected representatives expressed their concern and commitment to the cause of Bhangis and gave copies of the resolution passed, and the decisions made to rehabilitate them.

Interestingly, the right wing Sriram Sene leader Mr. Pramod Muthalik who visited the members of the Bhangi families posed before press persons and TV channels simultaneously; his followers shouted slogans “Bharath Maatha Ki Jai” till he left the place. Sangh Parivar, through its Sriram Sene chief, entered the scene using the Bhangi incident to pursue its communal agenda in the constituency which has a predominant Muslims population (60%).

A local Dalit leader complained that the Social Welfare Office is generally indifferent and apathetic towards Dalits. Despite innumerable social welfare schemes for the welfare of Dalits and a Special Component Plan which mandates compulsory allocation of 15% of all development funds for the SCs, most of the Bhangi families continued in manual scavenging, their health conditions were appalling and they did not have ration cards.

Tokenism to Bury Larger Issue of Manual Scavengers

The tokenism resulted in erosion of the real issue - under pressure, nine families opted for the posts of sweepers in the Municipality, four asked for loans to start petty business, and old age pension for one. Chandru Bangi, a disabled person, and the only ITI diploma holder, had not got any disability pension or assistance so far and he asked for financial assistance to set up a welding shop. In their deprivation and option-less situation, many of them considered a sweeper's post as a symbol of enhanced status and a respectable position and opted for it. The systematic caste discrimination encoded in the very working of the Municipal Council was

very visible. The series of documents accessed and information gathered endorse the fact of systemic prejudice against the Bhangis, the Dalits among Dalits. Various schemes which are meant for the welfare of the SC/ST community just lapse or is siphoned off, the Administration making no proactive attempt to reach them to the needy community.

Following the incident of July 20, the Social Welfare Office took three immediate actions purportedly for Bhangi welfare: conducting survey of manual scavenging families, issuance of ration card and sanction of incentive money of Rs. 50,000 per couple for inter-caste marriages. None of the 14 families have been able to access any Government scheme so far. It is evident that the Social Welfare Office has not undertaken any rehabilitation program under the Prohibition of Dry Latrines Act 1993, even after a lapse of 17 years. Food grains for a month were issued to 11 families by the Social Welfare office as immediate assistance - however the food grains reached the families only after nine long days! Departments responsible for the education of children in the community, the enumeration of children and enrolling them in the school register began only after the protest!

One of the important issues that got buried in the whole drama of appeasing the seven protesting families was the actual number of manual scavengers in the Municipality area. The Dalit households engaged in menial work were 41 with a total population of 202. Further, the larger issue that has not been raised and got buried in the damage control action to protect the 'honour' is that of manual scavengers in general and the issues of their livelihood and dignity. In Savanur town there are 4,977 latrines with 50% being open latrines and complete absence of underground sewage. This indicates that only seven families cannot maintain them and there are large number of Dalits who are working either on contract basis or on daily wage whose issues are not taken up. The Government which denies the existence of manual scavenging was in a hurry to see that this issue did not surface as manual scavenging is "***legally eradicated and that technically there were no manual scavengers***"!

Whither Violation of Dalit's Right to Life and Dignity?

The act depicts exploitation of the vulnerability of Bhangis and the violation of the rights of Dalits. The actions of threats, disconnecting water supply, barging into and dumping waste in front of their homes, insulting women and threatening them, clearly amounts to violation under various sections of the SC/ST Prevention of Atrocities Act 1989 and the Protection of Civil Liberties Act. The families were not allowed to draw water from other public sources of water, and the Municipality made them collect drain water near public taps, resulting in children falling sick. The Assistant Commissioner asked them to pay for reconnection and denied water. Despite the enactment of free and compulsory primary education, a 13-year old boy, Yesu Bhangi, was engaged in manual scavenging and had discontinued his education till 3rd standard. Hence the larger issue of the rights of manual scavengers, their human dignity got buried in the swift action that followed the protest. The systemic prejudice against Dalits, combined with the apathy and arrogance of the bureaucrats who collude with the interests of the local power wielders, is very evident.

When the neglected peripheries and shanties in growing small towns become the centre of economic activities as their settlements become visible due to the land that they dwell on, a process sets in with the connivance of all the others who have developed "stake" in the land. The people supposedly without human dignity now become a blot for 'development'. Though wanting to clean up human dirt, the prejudice and practice of untouchability continues. The incident highlights the perpetual arrogance, abuse, threats and subjugation that they have to face.

The imbued arrogance of the ruling class and the practice of discrimination express itself through ways which denies the very existence of Dalits! In the year 2013, as the writ petition of the Safai Karmacharis was being heard in the Supreme Court, Government of India and the

National Human Rights Commission undertook a joint operation to enumerate the manual scavengers in about 3500 small and big towns. However, the officials of Karnataka have denied the presence of manual scavengers thus again denying them of every opportunity of being counted or rehabilitated. The new legislation “The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 (No.25 of 2013)” recognizes only the registered manual scavengers and thus defeating the very purpose of this legislation! Though in principle a self-declaration (affidavit) is sufficient for this recognition, it has been a great struggle with the officials to accept these affidavits. The bureaucracy is doing its best to thwart this very process.

The manipulation of land records, passing of resolutions, disconnecting water supplies while doing nothing to rehabilitate the community in total violation of the legislation of Prohibition of Dry Latrines Act 1993, SC/ST Prohibition of Atrocities Act 1989, etc., is the oft-repeated story of social discrimination against Dalits in any given place in the country. The incident which happened in a very small town far away from the Capital of the State typifies such incidents in rural India where the gap between the policy statements, programmes and its ACTUAL reach to the last and the most powerless where the social discrimination is experienced in its totality of punch and might.

Manual scavenging is a caste-based occupation ridden with the complexities of poverty, subjugation and powerlessness. Gita Ramaswamy (2005) vividly describes the plight of those who are in this occupation. The deaths of manual scavengers trapped in the man-holes, or in the underground drainages, is rarely covered by the media. Their nature of the occupation keeps them closer to the townships where sanitation is a huge problem and the places that they occupy over a period of time are seen as valuable commodities. The incident and the dynamics around the issue shows the process of nexus of various people in burying the truth with

tokenistic gestures and their ability to evade the real issue – the dignity and well-being of Dalits.

What followed in Karnataka was a hopeful but forceful campaign to expose the lies of the Government by evidence-gathering and fact-finding on the existence of manual scavenging and the practice of night soil carrying – they became strong evidence in the Supreme Court which culminated in the new Act for the prohibition of the employment of manual scavengers. However, the Act and such legal enactments, more often than not, become a tool for the bureaucracy to deny the existence of manual scavengers rather than recognizing and rehabilitating them! So, a prejudiced mind-set invents newer methods to continue the practice of social discrimination, irrespective of any law or regulation. The new Act is only half the battle won. But the further battle is to see that Bhangis and manual scavengers get identity cards which will recognise them manual scavengers thus making them eligible for rehabilitation under the new Act. In many states the bureaucrats are busy guarding the ‘honour’ of the State by saying that there are no manual scavengers.

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