

About SuSanA

Sustainable Sanitation Alliance is an open network of people and organisations who share a common vision on sustainable sanitation and who want to contribute to achieving the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular SDG6. SuSanA came into existence in early 2007. Since then, it has been providing a platform for coordination and collaborative work. SuSanA connects members to a community of people with diverse expertise and opinions. SuSanA also serves as sounding board for innovative ideas. SuSanA also contributes to policy dialogue through joint publications, meetings and initiatives. For more information log onto www.susana.org.

About the Authors



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sustainable
sanitation
alliance

WHERE THERE ARE NO SEWERS



PHOTOESSAYS ON SANITATION WORK IN URBAN INDIA

Produced on behalf of SuSanA by:



giz Deutsche Gesellschaft
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Zusammenarbeit (GIZ) GmbH

Preface

Over 2 billion people lack access to sanitation in the world and about 760 million of them live in India. India has made a huge progress with the Swachh Bharat Mission. Over 89 million toilets have been built since 2014. Taboo topics like open defecation and menstrual hygiene have already made their way into mainstream Bollywood movies. These are very important great steps in the right direction. However, other aspects remain unaddressed. We need to look at the whole sanitation value chain and aim for more sustainable sanitation systems along that chain – including usage, maintenance, safe disposal and treatment of human excreta and sewage.

Millions of sanitation workers who clean sewers, open drains, septic tanks, community and school toilets, railway cleaners, as well as pit emptiers, and the severe conditions they face, need our specific attention. Often, sanitation workers are poorly paid, lack safety training, and do not wear protective gear. As a result, workers are demanding a better work environment. While sanitation along the whole service chain is a precondition for dignity for all, there is also a gender dimension in this topic that needs special attention. Around half of the population of sanitation workers are women in a country where less than 30% of the workforce is female (World Economic Forum report, 2017). In general, women are more often pushed to do manual labour whereas men do predominantly automated labour (truck operations). We will only be able to accelerate our efforts for sustainable sanitation for all if we understand and see what the realities are, which we aim to change. The authors capture in their essays the untold stories of sanitation workers with powerful photographs. May these stories help us all to accelerate our efforts in contributing towards more sustainable and inclusive sanitation systems along the whole service chain.



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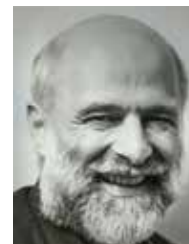
Foreword

The Sustainable Sanitation Alliance (SuSanA) is vibrant and diverse because of countless contributions that come from over 330 institutional SuSanA partners and nearly 10,000 members. Most of the dedicated work comes as voluntary contributions to support the idea of the SuSanA Network.

I take this opportunity to send a big “Thank you” from the wider SuSanA community to the German Federal Ministry for Economic Development and Cooperation (BMZ). The Ministry’s continued support to the SuSanA Secretariat since 2007 has helped in forming this network into a key catalyst and facilitator for enthusiasm and collaboration in the sector.

These photo essays on sanitation work in urban India are a great example of the contributions from SuSanA enthusiasts, which can be disseminated more widely now. I am excited about the excellent work of Isha Ray (University of Berkeley) and CS Sharada Prasad (Azim Premji University), and the way in which they help us see, acknowledge and fathom these untold stories.

May their stories and excellent photos contribute to better equity through the creation of more sustainable sanitation systems in India and beyond.



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INTRODUCTION

November 19 is World Toilet Day. Enormous progress has been made in the global effort to provide safe and affordable toilets for the world's poorest citizens since World Toilet Day was first declared in 2001. Significant strides have been made in "reinventing" toilet designs for low-income, water-short, unsewered urban zones; celebrities such as Bill Gates and Matt Damon have brought this once-taboo topic into the open; and the Prime Minister of India--the country with the highest number of people still practising open defecation--has publicly declared that his country needs toilets over temples.

Well over two billion people today lack access to basic sanitation facilities, according to the World Health Organization; about 760 million of them live in India. The goal of this Day is to make the global community aware of their right to safe and dignified sanitation and to support public action and public policy to bring this right closer to those who do not enjoy it today. In these photo essays, we focus on the back-end of the sanitation chain, on those who clean out latrines where there are no sewers to carry away the waste.

THE MANUAL SCAVENGERS

When toilets are cleaned without mechanical equipment and without protective clothing, scooping out faeces from 'dry' latrines and overflowing pits, the job is called "manual scavenging". It is an ancient profession and India, which made the practice illegal in 1993, still has over one million such cleaners (the exact number is unknown and declining). They service low-income urban households, railway tracks, and army barracks; they come from the lowest strata of the Hindu caste system, and about 90 percent of them are women. Despite valiant civil society and several government efforts to train them for other professions, breaking out of this denigrated caste-based profession remains very difficult. Many *mehters*¹ live in the shadows of society, invisible yet reviled, taunted yet essential, trapped in an unconstitutional practice without viable alternatives.

In a real sense, 70 years after Indian independence, this is a community still waiting for its freedom. In this photo-essay, we explore the daily lives of the toilet-cleaners: their homes, their hopes, their work, and their determination to get their children out of it. If World Toilet Day is about expanding access to clean toilets, it must also be about those who have to clean the toilets.

¹One among the scheduled caste / Dalit communities in India

It's December and we are in Lucknow. Old Lucknow is a city of medieval architecture and narrow alleys. The alleys are crowded, with gutters on either side that drain away anything that flows--rainwater, bath water, kitchen waste, human excreta. The streets have no sidewalks. On this cold winter morning, most people are indoors, but those who pass Rajan either do not see him or they say nothing. He is cleaning out a household toilet in broad daylight, his socks and flip-flops protecting his feet from the cold and the muck.



The excreta is loose, so it takes several attempts to clean it all out. When he has scooped everything into his bucket, he carries it down the alley, and tips the waste into the gutters on the side. The yellowish sludge dissolves into the watery blackness.



Rajan is from the Valmiki caste; he is from a family of scavengers and he inherited his job when he was just 14 years old. He lives with his wife and sons in a two-room house, with a small main room leading to an even smaller kitchen. The house is right next to an open drain, but it is spotless inside.



With young children to manage, the mother of the boys works as a part-time domestic help in nearby houses. She goes into her immaculately maintained kitchen and starts making tea for her guests. She pours the milky tea into three tiny steel glasses; Rajan looks at the number of glasses and says that he does not want any.



Rajan does not want his boys to inherit the family job. Except for the little one, they all go to school. The second one is especially bright and plans to be a bike mechanic, he says.

This is a community that will do just about anything to make sure their children get educated. Kishen and Meena, like Rajan, have pinned all their hopes on education for their children. They both clean toilets. Their house is just a room, 15 feet by 10 feet. At one corner, there is a small kitchen-like setup. The house is lit by a single lightbulb, but the toilet is a porcelain pour-flush one, clean and dry.



Their problem is TV, they say; no one touches his homework when the Hindi soap operas come on. No one even moves. "These children think that education is free. Education is free only in government schools. But our children: I save up every month to send both my children to private schools." Meena is proud and worried all at once. The children go to a Christian school, 3 km away from home. "Better to send the children to a school a bit far away from where we work. If other children get to know the child's caste or the parents' occupation, they bully our children." A rickshaw comes for them, she says, they do not have to walk.





This evening, Kishen and Meena are back from a full day of work. They wash, and then settle down to their dinner--*roti and dal*². "You know, when you start doing this work, it is hard to eat *dal* for a couple of months," Kishen says. "Anything yellow makes you sick."

²Lentils



Meena moves closer to the fire and suggests some chai; she has not had any all day. It is not that there is no time: But "we don't eat or drink until we've washed ourselves. Cleaning the shit of these people is bad enough. I don't want to put that in my mouth."

The next morning, just after 7am, we go out with Vasumati. Her husband does not want her to do this work. "But we have two children and we need money for their school, for their shoes," he says. "We could start a business with the money the government will lend us. But we don't really know how to manage a business." He is afraid the business will fail and the family will lose their home. How about a small business that does not need a big investment? A corner shop or a tea stall? "A tea stall is a great idea. People drink a lot of tea in Lucknow. But if they get to know our caste, we'll run into problems."

There is no easy escape out of this job. They all know that.



Vasumati takes us to her storage spot. A broom, a bucket, a U-shaped scooper, and a bamboo basket are stacked on top of one another. They are covered in dust and ash; it is easier to empty the bucket with the ash layer because the content does not stick to it. Vasumati covers her head and hair with her scarf. She covers her nose.



Her first stop is a house that we do not even have to enter. There is a hole covered with a metal sheet about three feet away from the entrance. She slides open the door and squats in front of the opening.

“How much do the households pay?” we ask, as Vasumati scoops the excreta into her bucket. “Rs. 50 (~\$0.75) per person per month. Children who have not reached puberty and people over 60 years are not counted...Who can argue with them? These rules have been around for a long time.” She moves carefully, avoiding the water, she is flushing into the gutter, and then she straightens up.

She has to get going. She has 32 more toilets to clean today.



THE MECHANICAL EMPTIERS

India's flagship sanitation program, Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM), highlights both the importance of latrine use, and also of "safe and proper disposal". Since most of urban India is not connected to sewers, the SBM recommends that cities work towards technological, financing and governance initiatives that would ensure safe faecal sludge management. In practice, this means mechanical (i.e. truck-and-hose) sludge removal as opposed to the now-illegal manual method of emptying toilet pits. But how do cleaners live and work; what do their days and nights demand of them; and to what extent does their work rely on India's age-old caste system, about which SBM policies are silent? What, in other words, does the "back-end" of Swachh Bharat look like in an Indian city?

We trace the flow of waste from pit to dump in urban India, making visible the labour that produces the sanitary city.

It is a typical December day in the lives of Deepak, Rajesh and *Prabhu*³. They empty out septic tanks and soak pits for homes and businesses, they are all from the *Maadiga* (Dalit) community, and they have been at this job for three to five years. Deepak is driving a yellow Tata 909 truck fitted with a large cylindrical tank at the back. The men are going to a home in a middle-class neighbourhood, whose toilet has backed up because the pit is full.



³This part of the essay is not a product of one specific day in one specific city but is a composite illustration of the several days and evenings that Sharada Prasad spent with truck operators in Bangalore, Dharwad and Guntur (all in South India). All photographs received informed consent for publication from our interviewees, but Deepak, Rajesh and Prabhu are also composite characters. No actual named individuals are included in these pictures.

It is not hard for a homeowner to find an emptying service when he needs one. Truck owners paint the name and number of the service in large font and bright colours on the holding tanks and on city walls; the drivers carry business cards; they park at busy intersections where they can easily be seen while waiting for a service call. Fliers are distributed with the daily newspapers; the Yellow Pages carry advertisements. After the legal abolishment of manual scavenging in 2013, truck-based cleaning services really took off.



When the truck reaches the home, Rajesh and Prabhu jump out and try to locate the pit; it is covered by a concrete slab and it's under a foot of soil. They find the slab and pry it open to insert the hose. The other end of the hose is attached to a vacuum pump. On Prabhu's signal, Deepak starts the truck engine, which gets the pump started. In a few minutes, the pit is empty. Prabhu and Rajesh work quickly to coil the hose back on the hook attached to the tank.



The men work with bare hands and have flip-flops on their feet. They say that the gloves and boots in the market are not designed for the kind of job they do, and they do not want to scare the public: “We don’t wear gloves or masks. Wearing them makes people think that our work and the waste we carry in our truck is dangerous. Therefore, we act normal, as if it is harmless. That also makes dumping it a lot easier.”



The crucial part of this business is dumping the sludge, and it is not easy to find discreet dumping spots. Deepak says that Prabhu is an expert at finding suitable spots, but Prabhu modestly demurs. He just gets lucky, he says. Open and dry plots in the periphery of the city are always good, he explains, the soil dries fast and does not hold the smell for long.

The large storm water drains that carry water out of the city – *raja kaluve*-- already carry sewage, and the main sewer lines can be accessed from side alleys all over the city's outer edges. The cleaners have to be quick if they use the main sewer lines, though; they could be reported to the city. Finally, there are the farmlands – dumping sludge on a fallow farm is a safe option for the operator. This is a good option for smaller cities like Guntur or Dharwad, but Bangalore has urbanized so rapidly that there are not many farmlands in the periphery anymore.



Rainy days are the best but rainy nights are even better. “We find a road that is flooded,” says Deepak. “We park the truck, attach a short pipe to the drain valve and lower it just enough to submerge it, then we open the valve and let the sludge mix with the rainwater”. Don't people notice the sludge coming out of the pipe? “No, not really. The rainwater is muddy and flooded roads have slow traffic-- people are completely focused on driving.” Sometimes vigilante groups, calling themselves the “public”, take videos, curse, (“they say we are *soolemaklu*”⁴) and threaten to call the police. However, the sanitation workers are mostly left alone. “Who has the patience to stop their vehicle in ankle-deep water, wade through sewage, come to us, and ask?”



⁴In Kannada, “sons of whores”

This morning it is not raining and the truck stops right in front of an open drain outside the city proper. Rajesh and Prabhu connect the PVC pipe to the draining end of the tank and open the valve. In eight minutes, gravity empties the tank.



The next step is the septic tank of one of India's best known companies. That tank is large – 8 to 10 trips will be needed to empty it. If a man is not careful, he could fall into the pool of sludge and die. Cleaners do, every year. Rajesh connects the end of the pipe to the pump. Prabhu ties a five-foot long iron bar to the end of the pipe and submerges it into the sludge. The bar acts as a mixer. Deepak starts up the pump and the truck tank fills up in about 12 minutes. Then the men are out on the road with the first load of sludge. No one has washed his hands.

Once the third load has been dumped into an open drain, Deepak takes a swig of whiskey; Rajesh and Prabhu share a packet of *gutkha*⁵.



Deepak says that everyone he knows drinks. "I drink even when I don't work." Prabhu, too: "But I only drink when I am home. I eat *gutkha* when I work." And Rajesh? "No. I don't drink. I just eat *gutkha*."

⁵A mix of areca nuts, seeds, herbs and tobacco. It produces a "buzz" when chewed.

The men are almost done with emptying the fourth load of sludge when a police jeep passes and stops. Deepak gets out and walks towards the jeep. In a couple of minutes, Deepak is back. "Those people want their share." He sounds matter-of-fact. "We pay them the *mamool*⁶ when they see us or when we go home past the police station."



⁶In Kannada, "The usual"

Urgent calls are answered during the day, pretty much all day, the cleaners said, but certain pre-arranged cleanings are done during the night. Elite hotels, especially, want the septic tanks cleaned at night; they do not want their guests to see or smell the operations. Tonight the men have been called in by a "large, posh" hotel. "People pay Rs. 10,000 per day to stay in the hotel, and their shit smells just like everybody else's," says Prabhu. He thinks it will be almost 5am before the men can go home.

Suctioning faecal waste via a hose and pump is progress over manual scavenging in which faeces are cleaned using hand-held tools and carried away in a cart. The three men know that. They also know that the job of working with sludge is still left to a sub-section of Dalits. It is risky work, they are disgusted by the waste they handle, they need alcohol and opioids to numb the senses, there is no protection, and there are no benefits. However, they agreed, there is a small measure of job security: "The job security we have is our caste. Other castes will not do this work."



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