



## OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH PROBLEMS OF POURAKARMIKAS

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### ABSTRACT:

*Pourakarmikas (also called civic workers or sanitation workers or scavengers) are responsible for maintenance of clean environment in cities and towns and are working under Municipalities or Municipal Corporations. As the cleaning occupation is treated as lower, Pourakarmikas are facing many of the problems such as social discrimination, alienation, social exclusion, poverty and even untouchability. They are also facing occupational health problems such as Hepatitis-B, respiratory problems, Musculo-skeletal problems, allergy, Leptospira, rabies and such others. Hence, it is suggested to pass strict legislations to curb social problems such as social discrimination, alienation, exclusion and untouchability. Further, it is suggested to increase medical and healthcare facilities for them and their family members.*



**KEYWORDS:** Health Problems, Pourakarmikas, civic workers.

### INTRODUCTION

In India, the maintenance of clean environment has become a challenge and many sanitation workers are working under Municipal Corporations whose responsibility is to maintain sanitation in their respective towns and cities. Their work includes sweeping roads, cleaning toilets, cleaning septic tanks, disposal of human and animal excreta, collecting and transporting garbage, etc. All this sanitation work is physically hard, smelly, disgusting and often dangerous: 90 per cent of municipal sanitation workers die before their retirement age, most from occupation-related health conditions (Khatri, et al, 2018). Sanitation workers are known as 'civic workers' or Pourakarmikas. In Hindi, sanitation workers are called as 'Safai Karmacharis' and in Kannada language, they are called as "Pourakarmikas". Sanitation and Scavenging communities got traditionally engaged in this disgraceful occupation with least respect which was then forced into the lowest strata of the social structure. These scavengers are ostracized to other occupations due to the stigma attached with their social and economic status. These communities are varied and heterogeneous across the schedule caste and the different religions which they adopted in India (Kadam and Gawde, 2017). Scavenging is clearing of roads, garbage, toilets including dry latrines that do not have water. Historically, when one looks at the scavenging community in India, it is observed that through generations, this inhuman work is done exclusively by the Dalits across the country. The community involved in scavenging is known by different names like Mehtar, Bhangi, Doms etc in different parts of the country. Whatever names they

are known by, they belong to the bottom of the Hindu social hierarchy and are forced to do menial work (Sathish Kumar, 2018).

Due to their occupation and occupation-based castes, Pourakarmikas are neglected, exploited, discriminated and even alienated in society. The sanitation workers make up the most underappreciated workforce in the society even after doing their job. Death of sanitation workers who enter sewers without any protective gear have also been reported time and again.

Scavenging has been in Indian society since ancient times. There has been specific mention about scavengers in almost all writings on India's caste system. Picking up night-soil, leather work, removing dead cattle and a few other lowly jobs like this were considered inferior and so were the people doing them. This kind of work was also performed by a certain sub-caste Shudras or rather were obliged to perform. Due to the nature of their work they were regarded as untouchables and thus were segregated from the reach of other respectable and so-called touchable people. They had to live separately and so-called touchable people. They had to live separately in clusters outside the town or extreme part of the villages. They were subjected to various forms of discriminations and disabilities. Thus, they continued to remain socially downtrodden and economically backward. In general, their existential reality can be described as (Sathish Kumar, 2018):

#### **Scavengers constitute a group treated as impure and ritual avoided;**

They are backward and oppressed because they have been assigned the lowest status in society. Minimal social contact has kept them at a distance from the society. Because of their degradation they have been compelled to accept discrimination as a part of their fate. Most scavengers are illiterate and thus, educationally backward; Scavengers are economically backward too as they are engaged in low-paying jobs and male members indulge in bad habits like smoking, drinking and gambling; Due to their economic and educational backwardness, they have also not been able to take advantage of the privileges meant for the welfare of the dispossessed; This profession as initially never hereditary but over a period of time it has become hereditary.

Most Pourakarmikas have to work in such a hazardous and risky environment and most workers continue to work without appropriate treatment as they ignore their illness, and do not want to miss their wages or lose their job. Because of their hectic work sanitation workers are prone to various health hazards. Life expectancy amongst civic workers is low. Many develop asthma, skin infections and tuberculosis on the job. Hundreds reportedly die from the work each year. According to the Mumbai based research organization Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS), 80% of the manual scavengers die before they turn 60 because of health problems. TISS says in Mumbai alone, an average of 20 sewer workers dies each month from accidents, suffocation or exposure to toxic gases (Karthikeyan, et al, 2014). Due to manual scavenging, 06 Pourakarmikas were died in 2013-14, 03 were died in 2014-15, 11 Pourakarmikas were died in the year 2015-16 and so far in 2016-17, totally 04 manual scavengers were died in Karnataka (Kamalesh Kumar, et al, 2016).

#### **CONCLUDING REMARKS:**

When the work and life of Pourakarmikas or civic workers is analysed, it is found that, they are most deprived sections of the society. Even though the practice of untouchability is banned, still many of the Pourakarmikas are facing untouchability. Even all the Pourakarmikas are excluded and discriminated in civil society. Apart from these problems, Pourakarmikas are facing severe health problems discussed above due to their work. As they are getting lower wages or salary, they are unable to bear their healthcare expenses. Hence, it is suggested to the Municipal Corporations to extend healthcare benefits to all the Pourakarmikas. Reimbursement of medical expenses, medical leave with salary and such other healthcare facilities are essentially needed for Pourakarmikas.

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