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## Basic Sanitation and Caste in India: a tribute to B.R Ambedkar

*Saneamento básico e o sistema de castas na Índia: um tributo a B.R. Ambedkar*

*Saneamiento básico y el sistema de castas en la India: un homenaje a B.R. Ambedkar*

*Assainissement de base et système de castes en Inde: un hommage à B.R. Ambedkar*

### ABSTRACT

It is a particular fact of Indian society to manually clean latrines and septic tanks. Its practitioners, known as manual scavengers, mostly belong to the most vulnerable caste in society, the Dalits. The article seeks to relate the relevance of the legacy of anti-caste struggles fostered by B.R. Ambedkar, relating the caste system to basic sanitation practices in the country. Ambedkar held a heated debate with Gandhi on the subject, and both presented different solutions to the question. In the 2000s, combating open defecation practices became a central part of social programs in the country. In 2014, the federal government launched the Clean India Mission, a social program aimed at universalizing access to toilets in the country. In this context, the article will move on to an analysis of the relationship between the caste system and current sanitary practices.

**KEYWORDS:** India; caste; sanitation.

### RESUMO

É um fato particular da sociedade indiana a limpeza de latrinas e fossas sépticas de forma manual. Seus praticantes, conhecidos por manual scavengers, pertencem em sua maioria à casta mais vulnerável da sociedade, os dalits. O artigo busca relacionar a relevância do legado das lutas anticastas fomentadas por B.R. Ambedkar e o sistema de castas nas práticas de saneamento básico na Índia. Ambedkar travou um debate caloroso com Gandhi sobre o tema, e ambos apresentaram soluções distintas para a questão sanitária. Nos anos 2000, o combate às práticas de defecação ao ar livre se tornou parte central dos programas sociais indianos. Em 2014, o governo federal lançou a Missão Índia Limpa, programa social com o objetivo de universalizar o acesso a banheiros no país. Nesse contexto, o artigo seguirá para uma análise da relação entre o sistema de castas e as práticas sanitárias atuais.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** Índia; castas; saneamento básico.

## RESUMEN

Es un hecho particular de la sociedad india la limpieza manual de letrinas y fosas sépticas. Sus practicantes, conocidos como manual scavengers, pertenecen en su mayoría a la casta más vulnerable de la sociedad, los dalits. El artículo busca relacionar la relevancia del legado de luchas anticastas fomentado por B.R Ambedkar, relacionando el sistema de castas con las prácticas de saneamiento básico en el país. Ambedkar mantuvo un acalorado debate con Gandhi sobre el tema y ambos presentaron diferentes soluciones a la cuestión. En la década de 2000, combatir las prácticas de defecación al aire libre se convirtió en una parte central de los programas sociales del país. En 2014, el gobierno federal lanzó la Misión India Limpia, un programa social destinado a universalizar el acceso a baños en el país. En este contexto, el artículo pasará a analizar la relación entre el sistema de castas y las prácticas sanitarias actuales.

**PALABRAS-CLAVE:** India; casta; saneamiento.

## RÉSUMÉ

C'est un fait particulier de la société indienne de nettoyer manuellement les latrines et les fosses septiques. Ses praticiens, connus sous le nom de manual scavengers, appartiennent pour la plupart à la caste la plus vulnérable de la société, les Dalits. L'article cherche à relier la pertinence de l'héritage des luttes anti-castes encouragées par B.R Ambedkar, reliant le système des castes aux pratiques d'assainissement de base dans le pays. Ambedkar a eu un débat houleux avec Gandhi sur le sujet, et tous deux ont présenté différentes solutions à la question. Dans les années 2000, la lutte contre les pratiques de défécation à l'air libre est devenue un élément central des programmes sociaux du pays. En 2014, le gouvernement fédéral a lancé la Clean India Mission, un programme social visant à généraliser l'accès aux toilettes dans le pays. Dans ce contexte, l'article passera à une analyse des relations entre le système des castes et les pratiques sanitaires actuelles.

**MOTS-CLÉS:** Inde; caste; assainissement.



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Basic sanitation practices in India face numerous challenges, many of them seemingly irreconcilable. By basic sanitation, we understand the practices involved in four major infrastructures: (1) sewage system (collection and treatment), (2) water system (treatment, management, and distribution), (3) solid waste (collection and treatment), and (4) rainwater drainage systems. Managing the waste produced in a territory inhabited by more than 1.3 billion people imposes immense challenges in the field of infrastructure, which imply public policies, public investment, possible public-private partnerships, among others. However, many of the solutions presented amplify social markers that structure the caste system.

A particular fact in India is the employment of workers to clean latrines and septic tanks manually. This practice is known as manual scavenging, and its practitioners, known as manual scavengers, who predominantly belong to the most vulnerable caste in society, the Dalits (SINGH 2014; MASUKI 2022). Also known as “untouchables”, Dalits make up the majority in the most precarious and unhealthy jobs in Indian society, which updates

the caste system in the sanitary practices of contemporary India.

In this context, we propose a debate on relevant issues in the field of basic sanitation, in line with the social and political organization of contemporary Indian society. The proposal in this article is to relate the relevance of the legacy of anti-caste struggles fostered by B.R Ambedkar, which brings to the debate the centrality of the caste system in basic sanitation practices in the country, mainly in reference to the manual cleaning practices of septic tanks and latrines. Ambedkar held a heated debate with Gandhi on the subject, and both presented different solutions to the sanitary issue, considered the centrepiece of the independent State project proposed by both. Gandhi sought the integration of manual scavengers into the body of society in a more dignified and humanitarian way; Ambedkar, on the other hand, was more incisive. In his main manuscript on the caste system, the *Annihilation of Caste* (1936), he demonstrated like few others the strength of the system that has existed continuously for more than three millennia (AMBEDKAR, 1936 [2014]). He used the term annihilation because he understood that the problems

afflicting the Dalit community were part of a struggle fought both in the field of legality as in the field of social justice.

The article will then move to contemporary times, in order to trace the influence and continuity of Ambedkar's legacy in the 21st century Dalit community. In the 2000s, combating open defecation practices became a central part of social programs in the country. With the election of Narendra Modi to the post of Prime Minister by the extreme right Hindu nationalist Bharatyia Janata Party (BJP) in 2014, the federal government launched the Clean India Mission – Swachh Bharat Mission – aiming universal access to toilets in the country. In this context, the article will move to an analysis of the relationship between the caste system and current sanitary practices.

### **GANDHI'S PROPOSALS ON THE FIELD OF SANITATION**

To follow Gandhi's attitude towards sanitation practices and those working in this field, it is relevant to visit his experiences in South Africa in the late 19th century. The Indian community in South Africa was the target of constant discriminatory attacks by the (white) South African elite in power, who

considered the area where the Indians lived to be unhealthy and related to epidemic outbreaks (GANDHI, 1979a, p. 555-557). Having strongly opposed the condemnation of the Indian community by the South African authorities, Gandhi realised that the victims of the epidemics were mainly the groups employed by the country's authorities “to do the dirtiest work”, such as “cleaning sewers”. Therefore, from the point of view of those authorities, the Indian community tended to “get as dirty in their habits as the legitimate blacks” (GANDHI, 1960, p. 363). The experience of racial prejudice of which Gandhi himself was a victim had a great impact on his commitment to health issues, both in Indian communities in South Africa and in India itself (PRASAD, 2015, p. 53-56). During his sojourn in that country, Gandhi strove to improve the sanitary conditions of the Indian community, stating that if “sanitation and hygiene were considered part of our being, prejudice would disappear, and to this end, every educated Indian has a unique privilege to become a missionary in hygiene and sanitation” (GANDHI, 1960, p. 176; 1961, p. 101). He believed that the use of



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better sanitary habits among the Indian community would end up attacking the root of the racial discrimination that afflicted them in South Africa. For Gandhi, it was important not only to maintain a state of cleanliness to live a healthy lifestyle and get protect against epidemics, but also to avoid discrimination against the Indian community, thus restoring their rights and pride. Those issues came to assume sociocultural and political significance in his Hind Swaraj: the project of an independent State and Nation through self-government.

Upon returning to India in 1915, Gandhi often linked the notion of sanitation with the notion of self-control, which he considered necessary for India's true independence, or swaraj (MASUKI, 2022, p. 8): “The path to swaraj is self-control. And self-control means personal cleanliness” (Gandhi 1969, p. 24). Thus, he believed that cleaning work “qualifies society towards swaraj” (GANDHI, 1975, p. 111), and urged citizens to keep their villages clean. The notion of cleanliness here refers both to the collection and treatment of human waste, as well as to the elimination of the practice of open defecation, a common practice in India to this day.

When reflecting on the problem of untouchability towards the Dalits community – a central feature of the caste hierarchy –, for Gandhi, the manual scavengers, in their functions of cleaning the latrines, played a crucial role in keeping cities and towns clean, and would be the main responsible for leading India towards independence and swaraj. Gandhi believed that “manual scavengers, in carrying out their duties religiously, would not only be burying the waste of Indian society, but would also observe the waste of each person and could inform each person of the state of his health” (GANDHI, 1970, p. 103). Gandhi conceived manual scavengers as workers situated at the level of “sacred”, characterized by “dignity”, understanding their functions as “in no way inferior to the duty of the clergy” (GANDHI, 1966b, p. 391). He regretted, however, that the upper castes “unfortunately have cultivated the habit of not taking care of their own sanitation, because of untouchability”, since they considered the work of cleaning latrines and septic tanks (and still consider it) as “the work of the untouchables” (IDEM). Therefore, Gandhi considered it crucial to spread the view that it is

wrong to accept untouchability as “part of [Hindu] religion” and sought ways to free manual scavengers from the challenge of untouchability “forever” (GANDHI, 1966, p. 571). To solve the problem of untouchability and to improve India's unsanitary conditions, Gandhi pleaded with the upper castes to actively participate in his campaign of waste collection and latrine cleaning (GANDHI, 1969, p. 96).

Gandhi urged people to use simple toilets (such as shallow pit toilets) and use human waste as fertilizer, rather than turning dry latrines into flush latrines, which meant the introduction of a wide sewer collection system. Emphasis was placed on the importance of improving current unsanitary methods imbued in sanitation practices by providing workers with adequate uniforms and cleaning equipment, thus ensuring that work takes place cleanly. Gandhi classified his proposals as a “scientific revolution”, in the sense that he used the term in the presumptions of ideas contained in the Hindi Swaraj manuscript (GANDHI, [1909] 1938). However, Gandhi's efforts to alleviate the practice of untouchability against manual scavengers was similar to his attempt to correct the

unsanitary conditions of the Indian community in South Africa. He believed that it was important for the upper castes to “set an example of being a perfect sweeper”, and to clarify the manual scavengers on how to perform their duties in a professional manner (GANDHI, 1966, p. 573). Furthermore, while he criticised the collective lack of empathy of the upper castes, he did little to encourage Dalits to change what he considered to be their traditional occupation. Although sanitary work was markedly praised by Gandhi, at the same time he did not abandon the idea that manual scavengers should “earn their livelihood by being manual scavengers” (GANDHI, 1976, p. 401).

For Gandhi, the upper castes had the main responsibility for eliminating untouchability, as he considered it was not directly related to the Dalits, but rather to members of the upper castes, who constantly engaged in its perpetuation. So, he appealed to members of the upper castes to eliminate untouchability practices, starting with not preventing Dalits from entering the temples. Yet, at the same time, he preached that Dalits should live in “cleanliness and purification” (GANDHI, 1966,



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p. 574). Gandhi's recognition of untouchability was therefore influenced by two assumptions: (1) that untouchability should be resolved by appealing to higher castes for a change “in hearts” (GANDHI 1982, p. 240), and (2) that sanitation workers needed to improve their unsanitary methods of cleaning. Hence, he strove to eradicate visible and substantial impurity, especially with the help of the higher castes. His effort and visions strongly distinguished him from Ambedkar.

### **AMBEDKAR'S PROPOSALS ON THE FIELD OF SANITATION AND INTOCABILITY**

B.R. Ambedkar is one of the most distinguished social activists who broke new grounds in the history of the Dalit movement, thriving up till today. During the anti-colonial struggle movements in the first half of the 20th century, Ambedkar emerged as a prominent Dalit leader. He severely rebuked the ideas proposed by Gandhi, which he considered to be “nothing short of cruelty” in relation to eradicating the untouchability of society (AMBEDKAR, 2019, p. 295).

Ambedkar was born in 1891 to a Dalit family of the Mahar caste, who currently

reside mostly in the state of Maharashtra. The Mahars were legally classified as untouchables. From his childhood, Ambedkar recounted numerous episodes of discrimination: as in large parts of India, Dalit children must sit apart from other children in the school context (those who are able to attend school), commonly mistreated by peers and mistreated by teachers. Many members of his family had to walk with a pitcher on their chest to collect saliva and sweat, avoiding contact with these fluids with members of higher castes, and others had to walk without shoes, prohibited from wearing shirts or ornaments in the presence of members of the higher castes. They had to live in segregated neighbourhoods, they could not share the same table, the same utensils, above all, they could not share the same artesian wells with members of the higher castes. Among all the countless forms of daily discrimination, Ambedkar concentrated a large part of his efforts on the political representation of these groups, access to education and – what concern us mostly in this article – he concentrated substantial part of his effort on the debate of access to water and sanitation practices in general.

Ambedkar defined the practice of untouchability as “the notion of impurity, pollution, contamination and the ways and means of getting rid of that impurity”. For him, the agency of untouchability in Hindu society was clearly hereditary (AMBEDKAR 2018, p. 21-22, 35), thus encompassing religion, economics, and society. He argued that this particularity could not be found outside Hindu society and sought to compare the practice of untouchability among Hindus with that among non-Hindus, taking examples from various communities around the world. For him, the clear difference in untouchability between Hindus and non-Hindus is that while the latter regard it as a “temporary” pollution (which can be observed mainly on occasions such as births and deaths, that can be followed by temporary segregation), the Hindus perceive the “untouchables’ impurity as permanent” (AMBEDKAR, 2018, p. 47). The Hindu mode of untouchability, according to Ambedkar, lays not on racial differences nor in profession, but rather in the “hereditary stain” of uncleanness by birth which can never be removed, even if the professional context changes (IDEM p. 47, 77-

107). In his view, the agency of untouchability was, and still is, an integral part of the Hindu religion.

Gandhi spoke about the challenges of improving conditions for manual scavengers. In a careful examination of Gandhi's efforts, Ambedkar disapproved of his arguments that untouchability can be eliminated by spreading the idea of cleanliness, as well as vehemently repudiating Gandhi's proposal to “praise manual scavengers as providers of the noblest service to society” (AMBEKAR, 2019, p. 292). For a Dalit, Ambedkar said, it is birth that determines untouchability, independent of the individual or group profession, they will be eternally untouchable (*Idem*, p. 292). Therefore, Ambedkar did not consider Gandhi's proposals to improve the lives of Dalits simply inadequate, but rather as a “curse”, and said that under Gandhi's eyes, Dalits should follow their hereditary professions and “the Untouchables should be eternal manual scavengers” (*Idem*, p. 295). Gandhi's enthusiasm for the sacredness of manual scavengers (GANDHI, 1976, p. 86-88) made Ambedkar harshly accuse him of having “applied to the pride and vanity of manual scavengers in order



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to induce them only to continue to be manual scavengers” (AMBEDKAR, 2019, p. 293). And, in response to Gandhi's views, Ambedkar said:

Preaching that poverty is good for Dalits [a-shudras] and no one else, preaching that misery is good for the untouchables and no one else, and making them accept these onerous impositions as voluntary purposes of life, appealing to their flaws is an outrage and a cruel joke on the helpless classes that none but Mr. Gandhi can perpetuate with equanimity and impunity (*apud* RAMASWANY, 2005, p. 99).

Ambedkar criticised the foundations of the Hindu religion. In this context, it is in the legal treaty (Shastras) *Manavadharmashastra*, known as the Code of Manu, or even Laws of Manu, that the main foundations of the caste system are found. The shastras are central to Ambedkar's analyses, given the prominent role that these texts, especially Manu, played and still plays in the legal and religious field of Indian society. The *dharmashastras* are part of a wider body of Indian literature called *Smriti*, which are authorial texts, which are a wide range of texts from the shastras to the epics, and the puranas (roughly speaking, *Smriti*, which encompasses the shastras, is a tradition of authorial texts, in contrast to the tradition of the *Shruti* which refers to the literature of revealed texts, such as the Veda

and Upanishads). As a result, Manu is sometimes referred to in the literature as *Manusmriti*.

It is in Manu that the systematization of most social practices that make up the caste system can be found. We find the following definition in Manu: Brahmins, Kshatrias and Vayshas are the varnas classified as reborn (twice born) and make up what we today call high caste. The fourth varna, the Shudra, has but one birth; it is therefore a low caste. There is not, says Manu, a fifth varna. But in Manu there is the qualification of those located outside the system, groups called a-shudras, adi-varna, chandala: people whose very existence compromises the listed, hierarchical system. It compromises in the sense that it is in Manu that the systematic bases of the system that revolves around the purity/impurity binary are codified.

Manu describes, or prescribes, a set of duties incumbent upon each member of the four varnas. It deals with rules of marriage, hospitality, funeral rites, dietary restrictions, impurities and the means of purification; it prescribes the conduct of women and widows, and of the laws of rulers. From the latter, Manu makes considerations on topics of legal

interest, and then returns to religious topics such as charity, rites of reparation, the doctrine of karma. The shastra makes no categorical distinction between religious laws and secular practices.

Two points are crucial in Manu for our debate: (1) Manu prescribes the structuring relationship of Indian society based on the nexus between purity and impurity; and (2) repeatedly, Manu informs us that the mark of assertiveness of the polluting character of relationships is in the transgressions of social markers.

Manu is constantly claimed in the Indian sanitary narrative. The text contains a group of verses that outline where defecation and urination are permitted, and which groups should be responsible for collecting and transporting waste. It is based on Manu that Gandhi maintains the sacred character of the work employed by manual scavengers; and it is in Manu that Ambedkar finds the main foundations for the exploration of marginalised castes.

Ambedkar was committed to seeing improvements in conditions for Dalits, including the social mobility of sanitation workers. In the 1930s, he mobilised Dalits

to “make them aware of their lack of rights” in the most diverse fields (ZELLIOT 2001, p. 69). The problem of untouchability, according to Ambedkar, revolved around “the idea of pollution by contact”, as systematised in Manu (AMBEDKAR, 2019, p. 294) and this was a powerful deterrent for high-caste Hindus to share common spaces and substances with the dalits.

As we look at Ambedkar's approach to improving the situation of marginalised communities, his perspectives on community development in India provide a clue. One of the most striking features of his political life is that he considered large-scale mechanisation and industrialisation to be an indispensable element. Unlike Gandhi, who on numerous occasions opposed the implementation of a sewer system (he was a great enthusiast of dry toilets), as well as Gandhi's followers, who called attention to the invention of toilets combined with water-saving technology, Ambedkar directed all his influence towards promoting a water resources development project in the country, such as irrigation, flood control, hydroelectric power generation and water supply (Government of India,



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Ministry of Water Resources, Development of Rivers and Ganges Rejuvenation, Central Water Commission 2016). Based on an approach to benefit the majority of the population, including “the poor and oppressed section of society” (*Idem*, p. 49), Ambedkar prioritized the efficient management of water and its use through mechanization, flush toilets and a wide sewage system.

These ideas were a striking contrast between Ambedkar's proposals and those of Gandhi and his followers, in view of the Gandhian critique of Western modernising structures (as expressed in Hindi Swaraj). Ambedkar's proposals aimed exclusively at improving the living conditions of the less favoured castes who, according to him, carried the entire burden of Indian tradition.

And these ideas were reflected in the perspectives of contemporary Dalit movements, which underline the importance of improving the sewage system to emancipate manual scavengers. A study conducted by Shyam (2018) portrayed several examples to corroborate that, in practice, Ambedkar directly contributed to the well-being of sanitation workers. The creation of unions, for example,

demonstrated Ambedkar's attempts to organise workers in the sanitation field “as a weapon meant for the elimination of discrimination” (SHYAMLAL, 2018, p. 79).

Access to clean water is crucial in the relationship of purity and pollution that surrounds the caste system. Access to public artesian wells was (and in many cases still is) denied to Dalits because of the belief in the potential for pollution. In 1927, Ambedkar led a protest – a *satyagraha* – against the practice of banning access to public wells by Dalit groups. In this protest, Ambedkar gathered a group of Dalits and together they drank what was called “high caste water”: water from a public well located in an area with most high castes, which Dalits had always been denied access to. Of his struggle for access to water, he said:

We have two goals in *satyagraha*. The first is to promote self-respect and self-esteem among the Untouchables. But that was the least of the goals. The main thing was to strike a blow at the Hindu social order. The Hindu social order is based on the division of labour which reserves for the Hindus clean and respectable jobs and assigns the untouchables dirty and slanderous jobs and therefore dresses the Hindus in dignity and adds degradation to the untouchables. *Satyagraha* was a revolt against this part of the Hindu social order. The objective was to make the Hindus do their own dirty work (*apud* RAMASWANY, 2005, p. 35).

In 1936, Ambedkar published his foremost critique of the caste system. The *Annihilation of Caste* manuscript was published as a critique of Hindu religious leaders who opposed the assumption that the caste system was the root cause of inequalities and injustices in Indian society. It was a text written in full debate with Gandhi, but not only in response to him. The text raised important questions, crucial in its time; according to him, other “social aberrations” such as apartheid, racism, sexism, and religious fundamentalism were politically and intellectually challenged in international forums. The question that followed him throughout his intellectual, activist and political trajectory was how the caste system, according to him one of the most brutal modes of hierarchical social organization among all societies in the history of mankind, managed to escape censorship and criticism. Thus, he spared no effort in publicising what he considered the greatest form of social oppression ever existing.

The text was written as a lecture to be held in Lahore (now Pakistan), for an upper caste audience that was part of a reformist society that preached a casteless reformed

Hinduism. The lecture would be given to members of the *Jat Pat Torak Mandal* (Society for the abolition of the caste system). The text was censored by the organising committee, given the high level of aggression against the Hindu religion, and the call for conversion. This lecture was never given, but he published the text independently, and it quickly circulated among nationalist circles in the anti-colonial struggles.

The text directed a critique of the foundations that permeate the caste system, the discrimination provided by the system, and, above all, it emphasised that the caste system is not relegated to a distant past. With concrete examples of reality, many of them examples of their own trajectory, Ambedkar brought the caste system to the discussion of the future of the Indian independent State and institutions. For him, it was feasible that countermeasures were essential for the system not to remain in the structures of the post-colonial Nation-State; independence from the British Empire was seen by Ambedkar as a historic opportunity to subjugate the system as a whole.

In the field of sanitation, he held meetings with workers from Mumbai and Delhi, which eventually led to the creation



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of a sanitation workers union in Delhi in 1944. Along with other Dalits, Ambedkar not only urged sanitation workers to abandon what was imposed as their “traditional occupation of manual cleaning”, but also forcefully underlined the significance of organising these workers for better working conditions and treatment in society (SHYAMLAL, 2018, p. 79, 81). Those actions thought were totally in disharmony with Gandhi's ideas.

### **THE MAIN DIVERGENCES AMONGST AMBEDKAR AND GANDHI**

Regarding the problems affecting most workers, Ambedkar's approach is in marked contrast to Gandhi's. Having demonstrated his adherence to the traditional division of labour based on the caste system, Gandhi preached the valorisation of cleaning work, paying attention to its moral and hygienic aspects. He advocated that people be their “own manual scavengers” and ended up creating the image of an “ideal job”, from which he encouraged supposedly uneducated workers to behave in a professional manner (GANDHI, 1976, p. 86-88). With the issue of untouchability facing workers in the field of sanitation in general, not only

cleaning latrines and septic tanks, but also collecting solid waste, it was essential that workers concentrated on cleaning and improvement of working conditions. Ambedkar in turn remained firm in his constant questioning and criticism of the structural inequalities of Hindu society. Therefore, he considered that Gandhi's idea about the “sacred” character of manual scavengers contained a high dose of hypocrisy and was no more than a fantasy, far from being a solution. Ambedkar did not regard the work of manual scavengers as “noble”, still less “sacred”; but as “dirty” and that, in general, members of the Dalit community were constantly constrained to take on this work as a “hereditary profession” to serve society as a whole (AMBEDKAR, 2019, p. 196, 292, 296). Hence, in valuing the struggle and agency of the Dalit community, its efforts to free them revolved around progressing towards their occupational mobility, increasing their educational opportunities, and establishing a legal framework to guarantee their rights.

Ambedkar and Gandhi essentially disagreed over what role manual scavengers should play in society, and how

they should be treated. Gandhi treated the moral element with great interest, engaging in clean-up work and urging citizens to do the same on an individual level, which for him would be closely associated with *Swaraj*. In contrast, Ambedkar devoted himself to restructuring the legal and political structures in Indian democracy, such as expanding public infrastructure through mechanisation to ensure that all citizens – not just certain caste minorities – could have access to adequate resources (such as water), in the same way that he defended the social and economic rights of sanitation workers.

### **SANITATION IN CONTEMPORARY INDIA**

Eradicating the practice of manual scavenging has been a constant debate in the various governments since independence. Different groups have adopted different approaches when dealing with this issue. Since the 1960s, during the celebration of the centenary of Gandhi, several non-governmental organizations with Gandhian influence have emerged in the country. They strived to eliminate manual collection and cleaning work by improving human waste disposal methods. Thus, they introduced the

intermediate technology of low-cost flush toilets and facilitated the conversion of dry toilets, which require manual handling, into flush toilets; eventually, the low-cost dual flush toilet was developed as an alternative to dry toilets (MASUKI, 2022). These organizations not only promoted the introduction of low-cost flush toilets, but also facilitated the commercialisation of flush toilets in major cities and towns. The main organization, Safai Vidyalaya, was created in Gandhi's home state of Gujarat, West India, founded by well-known Gandhi follower Padmashri Ishwarbhai Patel, considered it more important to free manual scavengers than tackle India's sanitation problem through mechanisation. Based on a “humanised” approach with a focus on manual scavengers, beyond simply building public toilets and low-cost flush toilets, Safai Vidyalaya engaged in providing sanitation training to police officers and sweepers, installing public toilets with plant systems of biogas and provide educational assistance to the sweepers' children.

In the 1970s, another well-known Gandhian on the Indian public scene, Bindeshwar Pathak, founded the organization called Sulabh International Social Service



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Organization in the state of Bihar, also with the aim of promoting the installation of low-cost flush toilets. Since then, the organization has been devoting efforts to promoting professional training and education for what they call ex-manual scavengers and their sons and daughters. Like Safai Vidyalaya, Sulabh understands manual collection and cleaning work as “dirty and sub-human” work that should be abolished immediately (PATHAK., 2006, p. 13). The Gandhians' approach to eradicating manual sanitation through the transformation of toilet technologies differs from Gandhi's own notion of sanitation (MASUKI, 2022, p. 22-23), as Gandhi sublimated work to a “sacred” level and insisted on in just improving its method, and the transport of human waste (GANDHI, 1966b, p. 391).

To some extent, the initiative of the Gandhians notably contributed to a decline in manual cleaning of latrines and septic tanks. These attempts, however, demonstrate a limitation in that they address the issue of eradicating untouchability within upper-caste leadership rather than involving the Dalits themselves. This constraint is also reflected in their organizational structure,

whereby Dalits rarely found their place in terms of leadership (SUZUKI, 2015, p. 118).

Recent studies and activists have shed light on how the limitations of reform by the Gandhians have strongly impacted sanitation workers in contemporary India. In the last few decades, public toilets have been popularised across the country, but there are problems with the caste structures of toilet cleaning and the mismanagement of workers. The sanitation workers who clean public toilets come mainly from the Dalit community, although employers have not defined any caste-based recruitment policy for this work (MASUKI, 2022, p. 21). For the latter, Sulabh, for example, mainly provides cleaning work on a contract basis. These actions are different from Gandhi's approach, which conferred dignity and respect on one's work; and does not share a complete resemblance to Ambedkar's critiques, which questioned the institutionalised category of manual scavengers, and the power that structurally inserted them into sanitation work, rather than simply discontinuing the specific manual cleaning work.

It was not until the 1990s that Dalits-led movements emerged and constituted the

most significant changes in the approach to eliminating manual cleaning of latrines and septic tanks. In 1990, amidst the celebration of Ambedkar's centenary (SUZUKI, 2015, p. 214), Dalit leaders organised the All India Safai Mazdoor Congress, a caste association that passed a resolution that included a request sent to Parliament in which they demanded that the practice of manual cleaning of human waste be legally prohibited and required the use of safety equipment for sanitation workers. This request was sent to Parliament in 1993 and resulted in the passage of the decisive but highly controversial law, "The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act" (hereinafter Act of 1993). This law established regulations on the eradication of manual cleaning of latrines. The focus of the Act of 1993, however, was confined to manual scavengers involved in the manual handling of human waste from dry toilets and did not refer to work performed manually in cleaning sewers and septic tanks. Seeing this as a steppingstone towards the elimination of manual cleaning practices, several organizations run by Dalits have come to

regard manual cleaning as an irrefutable crime to be abolished immediately and punished according to the law.

This attitude is different from Gandhi's view, who appealed to the conscience of upper-caste citizens, and Gandhians who tried to change conditions through technology. It is quite similar to Ambedkar's approach, which was crucial in framing India's constitution, which prohibits caste-based discrimination. One of the best-known Dalit-led NGOs fighting for the rights of sanitation workers is Safai Karamchari Andolan, known as SKA, co-founded in the early 1990s by Bezwada Wilson, a Christian social activist, who came to from a Dalit community. As a Dalit organization, the SKA claims Ambedkar's notable slogan: "educate, organize and agitate", and centralises the guarantee of Dalit civil rights in its agenda.

The prospect of criminalising the work performed by manual scavengers led to two distinct actions: (1) the institution of "public interest litigation" against human rights violations, and (2) the organization of sanitation workers more broadly to join the struggle. The SKA approach views illegitimacy and caste-based



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discrimination against manual scavengers as arising from the rule of law in a democratic nation. Unlike the Gandhian organizations, which reduced the marginalised position of manual scavengers to the inadequacy of technology and the scientific and technological discourse of the health issue, SKA's main efforts focus on trying to restore the humanity of manual scavengers in terms of a democratic vision, such as fundamental and constitutional human rights.

Since the 2000s, SKA has been engaged in a campaign to demolish dry latrines that require daily manual cleaning service, opposing government authorities who have taken no decisive action to punish those who violated the Act of 1993. The demolitions of dry latrines, as explained by the SKA, are not conducted in a predatory manner. Instead, toilet owners are notified in advance that their current toilets are illegal and must be removed by the organization. In 2010, they organised the Samajik Parivartan Yatra (Procession for Social Change), in which they toured several areas of the country in order to mobilise and raise awareness of the evils of manual cleaning of latrines and septic tanks.

Between 2015 and 2016, members of SKA have organised an extensive campaign in 500 districts in the country's 25 states. They have called on participants to stand up for the campaign to restore the constitutional and fundamental rights of sanitation workers and to eradicate the deaths that occur while cleaning dry latrines, sewers and septic tanks. Since the SKA movement against manual cleaning finds legitimacy in the law and in basic human rights, it addresses the issue of the division of labour by caste, not with moral, religious, or technological means, but underpinned by the democratic discourse of civil society. Thus, SKA is able to organise sanitation workers together, regardless of religion, gender or type of work. SKA also paved the way for the development of a transnational Dalit network.

Although it has managed to mobilise manual scavengers in various parts of the country, the work of cleaning and manual waste collection has not been eradicated. Research is needed to investigate how future SKA activities can mobilize Dalit communities from a long-term perspective.

In this context, a photo essay entitled "In Search of Dignity

and Justice” by renowned photojournalist Sudhakar Olwe, from 2013, portrays the reality of manual scavengers in the city of Mumbai. According to the author, in 2013, approximately 38,000 workers were engaged in the manual cleaning of latrines and septic tanks in the city, employed by the municipal company Brihanmumbai Municipal Corporation. This fact contradicts the struggles, as well as fits the illegality of the Act of 1993, demonstrating the non-effectiveness of jurisprudence in the body of a state agency. About manual scavengers in Mumbai, Olwe says:

This workforce comprises about 38,000 conservancy workers [in Mumbai alone]. They risk their lives and health and work in the most degrading and dehumanizing manner to help the city clean. The workers say They hate their work and that they lose a little dignity every day, till none is left and they begin to see themselves as garbage worthy of nothing, not even a little respect (OLWE, 2013, p. 70).

And, as the author puts it, it is past the time we recognise the contribution of these workers to our health and survival at the expense of the health and survival of themselves (OLWE, 2013, p. 16).

Several researchers on the subject, if not practically all who encounter this problem, ask themselves the reasons why these workers in charge of cleaning septic tanks do not

use protective material, such as safety rope, oxygen cylinder, masks, nor appropriate clothing, when going down sewer pipes or entering septic tanks. There are no convincing explanations on the part of any company or individual that employs this type of labour other than the lack of funds to do so. This immense contingent of workers, and their families, do not receive any compensation in case of injury, work accident or even death in the field. A 2007 study, carried out by Safai Kamgar Vikas Sangh, an entity representing workers in the health sector in Mumbai, pointed out that the average death rate of workers in this sector, in the city of Mumbai alone, was around 20 thousand people a year. This study emphasized that it is not a lack of funding, or a lack of technology, that poses a problem for these workers.

In a country with technology used to launch satellites, long-range missiles, and known for countless innovations in the field of Information and Communication Technologies, it is incomprehensible that there is no palpable technology to prevent any and all accidents at work. But the author of the study says: urban managers and technocrats never saw fit to create a safe system



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of dealing with garbage and sewage. On the contrary, they rely on an inexhaustible source of disposable and cheap Dalit labour” (GATADE, 2015).

Despite several attempts to eradicate this practice, the results were disappointing. Regardless of having enacted the Act of 1993, the central government took four years to notify it in the Official Gazette. The law was only put into effect in the middle of the year 2000. The law has an addendum earning twenty years for its clear effectiveness; to date (2022) not a single government has orchestrated its implementation. In fact, it was observed that the main violators of the law are the state agencies themselves. In the year 2013, India Railway was the main contractor of manual septic tank cleaning workforce.

Several organizations have sought, and continue to seek, legal interventions for the rapid implementation of laws that already exist, aimed at banning manual cleaning practices and the rehabilitation of workers in this sector. There is a collective effort to stop the Dalit community from exercising these practices.

## **CLEAN INDIA MISSION - SWATCHH BHARAT ANDOLAN**

Since 2014, government efforts have focused on a particular and extremely relevant aspect regarding sanitation in India. In 2014, studies showed that more than 50 percent of the Indian population did not have access to toilets (DORON & JEFFREY, 2014), making India the largest population in the world to practice open defecation (UNICEF, 2015). According to data from a large study organized by UNICEF in 2015, more than 620 million Indian men and women did not have access to sanitary facilities, having to defecate in the open, whether in forests, bushes, riverbanks or on train tracks, in near urban pipes. What draws our attention is the centrality of this issue in public debates after the 2000s. What we will see in the last session of this article is that the solutions to this problem, which is not new, rely on updating equally old issues.

Open defecation practices entered the public debate after several organizations and studies suggested they are one of the main problems in the field of public health, with wide-ranging adverse effects, such as childhood diarrhoea, polio

and parasitic infections. Human excreta are a major source of soil, water and, consequently, food pollution. Excrements from a sick person are the main source of infections as they spread the transmitting agent through several channels: through water, through contact with hands, through mosquitoes, through soil and through food.

The practice of open defecation is a consequence of the absence of domestic sanitary facilities, the first step in the collection of waste. However, the narrative present in Indian society, whether via government projects or organized civil society actions, as well as in the publicity and public debate of these issues, does not revolve around the need for universal access to toilets. The focus of the narrative in these media is to turn India “Open Defecation Free (ODF)”. Although universal access to sanitation facilities can be seen as the main action in eliminating open defecation, a closer look at the categories employed leads to a better understanding of the magnitude of the problems in this field.

Certainly, the absence of toilets is the main factor to consider in efforts to solve this problem, but there are several other important factors to consider. In addition to

the efforts undertaken, the construction of sanitary facilities in places without proper sanitary infrastructure such as waste collection and treatment results in toilets with septic tanks that require constant maintenance. In countless situations, the population does not have subsidies to cover the expenses inherent to deal with proper maintenance, and a substantial portion of those who have the resources to do so, demand manual work by Dalits. And, equally striking, studies show that over the years, there are those who maintain the practice of open defecation despite having sanitary facilities in their homes. These facts show us that access to toilets alone does not fully solve the problem of open defecation, and some of the solutions increase the structures of pre-existing social inequalities.

Eradicating open defecation practices has become central since 2014, with the election of Narendra Modi to the post of Prime Minister by the far-right Hindu nationalist Bharatyia Janata Party (BJP). On October 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2014, the date commemorating the birthday of Mahatma Gandhi, the federal government launched the Clean India Mission – Swachh Bharat Mission – a public subsidized



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program with the objective of universalising access to toilets in the country in a period of five years. The ambitious timetable proposed by Delhi sought to eliminate all forms of open defecation within five years, to celebrate the 100th anniversary of the Mahatma's birth on 2 October 2019. This program was the main social program of the first government of Prime Minister Narendra Modi.

The proposal was to build more than 110 million toilets over the course of five years. In view of the ambitious – and urgent – goal, the technology used in the subsidy was the construction of toilets with septic tanks. Given all the debate surrounding the maintenance of such toilets, there are great chances the project will contribute to the continuity of the practices carried out by the manual scavengers. Since the program was launched, several organizations have been demanding governmental funding of flush toilets instead, and the construction of an extensive sewage network in the country, just as claimed by Ambedkar. The construction of toilets solves the problem of open defecation, but it amplifies problems that by law should have already been criminalised.

The core of the campaign by

Modi merged aspects of public health with Hindu practices, in view of the Hindu nationalist project largely orchestrated by Modi and the BJP. Modi made use of Hindu symbology to project a harmonious vision of Indian society, where cleanliness is linked to spiritual purity, connected to the duty of each and every one towards Mother India (Bharat Mata). In a public oath, Modi appealed to the population: “It is our obligation to serve Mother India by removing all its dirt” (SWACHH BHARAT MISSION 2014). Simple and symbolic slogans are attractive, but they can fail to capture the broader and more complex reality, as well as act in the maintenance of social asymmetries, injustices and various caste discriminations.

It is important to trace the relationship between the BJP's political project and the ideas of Gandhi and Ambedkar. Hindu nationalism, known as *Hindutva*, an ideological bias spread by the BJP, manipulates the legacy of Gandhi and Ambedkar according to the occasion. Much closer to Gandhi's ideas than Ambedkar's, *Hindutva* is part of a political project to rescue Hindu values. The BJP seeks to present religious values as a cure for the problems embedded in

the political system and central administration of the country. In this sense, they claim the legacy of Gandhi. However, it must be remembered that Gandhi was murdered by a member of the Hindutva. The relation between Gandhi and contemporary hindutva is full of inconsistencies. Gandhi's trajectory cannot be summarised solely as a great reformer of Hinduism. Gandhi was, above all, a religious man who saw in the different religious communities an effective way out of the evils of Western modernity set in India by the British colonial government. In this way, he took a strong stand to fight discrimination against all religious minorities in India, especially against Islam. In this sense, Gandhi stood as a strong enemy of the project of an independent Nation that aimed to build an independent State only for Hindus. In contemporary India, in view of the constant violent attacks on the Muslim community, Gandhi would be a major opponent of Narendra Modi's political project. However, in the field of subjects that surround contemporary Hinduism, Modi's project is supported by many of Gandhi's proposals.

Modi's sanitary program rests on a notion of purity firmly

anchored in a problematic combination of state policies and the Vedic tradition. It is a remarkable fact of the political trajectory of the BJP members to disseminate a narrative that equates India with Hinduism, despite the religious diversity and the very divisions within the very notion of Hinduism. The Swatchh Bharat program does not deny its efforts to employ texts from the philosophical tradition that make up the body of legal and religious thought of Indian antiquity as a representative of the contemporary legal order. That relation has been synthetised in a state sponsored pamphlet called *Swatchhata Sanskriti. From the Historic to the Holy: India's Swatchhata Legacy* (2019).

The program's symbolism seeks historical and religious roots to support the purity of Indian society and, consequently, the Indian sanitary legacy in the course of its long history. It seeks to link an ancient tradition of purity with the construction of toilets today. In order to do so, it makes a historical review of the sanitary issue since the civilization of the Indus River Valley (about 5,000 BC), going through the Vedic era, when the question of purity entered the universe of



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the sacred. And the pamphlet covers the sanitary issue in all the main historical periods of Indian society (Maurian Empire, Buddhist tradition, Guptas, Mughal Empire, British Empire). It then comes with a conclusion that toilets have always been constant in Indian society and that only recently it has been absent in the lives of its population. And, according to the government's symbolic narrative around the issue, the current shortage is precisely due to a historical moment when institutional legality was no longer validated by the classic texts of the Sanskrit legal tradition. The rescue of traditions in Sanskrit is an engine of Hindu nationalism itself and, in the field of sanitary practices, the rescue and use of the Code of Manu is an example of this.

In this sense, the problems surrounding open defecation practices are exactly the same as those that permeate the debate around the work of collecting and manually cleaning latrines and septic tanks. Gita Ramaswamy, a renowned writer and social activist in Indian public debate clearly summarizes this relationship:

In large parts of the western world, the connection between human excreta and disease is clearly established. Human excreta are the main vehicle for

the transmission and spread of a wide range of diseases (...) In India, excreta are seen as impure (...) Traditional practices have failed to keep up with scientific advances in health management, leading to distorted practices, mainly in terms of having someone to perform these functions. Avoiding excrement is a ritualized practice in India: bathing after defecation (...) Hindu society does not care if public places are impregnated with human feces; but insists that inside the houses there must be no contact with excrement. Given the ritual of keeping excrement away, and the reality that excrement cannot be avoided, Hindu caste society, not surprisingly, found the solution in "polluted" castes who would manually handle excrement. Cleanliness and caste are closely linked (RAMASWAMY, 2005, p. 14).

The Clean India Mission program was the Modi government's largest social project. It is also one of the greatest testaments to the invisibility of the caste system. SKA leader Bezwada Wilson raised a simple but far-reaching question in an interview with *The Wire* newspaper (2017): "Who will clean the toilets being built under the Swachh Bharat campaign? In the absence of suction pumps, how should they be cleaned?". Far from any goal of eradicating manual cleaning, the Clean India Mission is, according to him, a recipe for perpetuating manual cleaning by Dalits for decades to come.

On January 30th, 2019, central government launched that 98.82 percent of the Indian

population had access to residential sanitation facilities. However, according to a vast study organized by the Research Institute of Compassionate Economics (RICE 2019) in the states of Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh between September and December 2018, there must be an enormous overcalculation in the data presented by the government. RICE study shows a broad decline in open defecation practice given the increase in residential sanitation facilities. The study shows that in these 4 states, which together represent 2/5 of the country's rural population, in 2014, 70 percent of the population did not have access to sanitary facilities, thus resorting to the practice of open defecation; in 2018 that number dropped to 45 percent. Given the lack of studies at the national level, it is difficult to validate the data presented by the central government. However, the improvement in this sector is visible.

In anticipation of the mission accomplished, about a week before Gandhi's 100 years birthday celebration, Modi announced at a rally in the city of Houston, Texas, to an audience of mostly Indian expatriates in the US, that all

the goals had been met. He then left in celebration for New York, where he received the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation Award in recognition of his contributions to sanitation in the country.

On the date Modi received his award, two young children were beaten to death in the village of Bhavkhedi, in the state of Madhya Pradesh, for the alleged crime of defecating in the open. The two children were from the Dalit community.

With the end of the program, the population remains unsure of the collection and treatment of sanitary sewage, having to autonomously deal with the cleaning of septic tanks (SWAB & KANNA, 2019). And this is where Dalit labour comes in as a solution. The proposal of the government program revolves more around the construction of sanitary installations than in the qualified and safe maintenance of the produced waste. Certainly, the urgency of implementing sanitation facilities is prominent; however, the construction of sanitary facilities without the proper structure to maintain them, could lead to the bad construction of toilets, in the burden placed on sanitary workers, mostly Dalits, and even the non-use of the toilets at all.



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## FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The central issues in the field of sanitation in the pre-independence period regarding manual work for cleaning latrines and septic tanks were discussed with emphasis (1) on the moral aspect of work, as put by Gandhi, and (2) on the structural inequalities of Hindu society as questioned by Ambedkar. Gandhi concentrated his efforts on emphasizing a certain “dignity” inherent to the work carried by the manual scavengers, given its centrality to life in society. His speech was not oriented towards the extinction of manual work, but it was closely associated with his ardour for mobilizing each individual towards Swaraj. To that end, Dalits, including manual scavengers, should be integrated and represented as an indispensable force in their struggle. Ambedkar’s discourse in turn was built on efforts to emancipate Dalits, including manual scavengers, through legal structures and labour organizations. Ambedkar’s approach aimed to expand the occupational spectrum of Dalits, hampered by the structuring power that led them to engage in hereditary work. Having dedicated himself to the well-being of all, including minorities, he tried to demonstrate the need for the implementation of a large-scale public sanitary infrastructure, exemplified in his Water Resources Development Project, which

focused on the implementation of a wide sewage network. In his view, this was the only way to end the practice of manual cleaning of latrines and septic tanks.

Since the ban on manual cleaning in 1993, Dalit-led liberation movements have revolved around the claim that such practices are not merely outdated, but above all illegal. They have been paving the way for the destabilisation of this practice under democratic authority and through the idea of fundamental human rights.

The 2014 Swatch Bharat program aimed to eliminate open defecation practices. However, due to the Covid-19 pandemic, few studies have been conducted in order to evaluate its implementation. We know that there has not been a large investment in sewage collection and treatment infrastructure, and that the overwhelming majority of toilets subsidized by the program were built using septic tank technology. Within the government program itself, there is no proposal to invest in mechanized cleaning via collection tanks. The lack of investment acts directly on the caste system, as it requires employing Dalit labour in manual cleaning. With this, the caste system remains a contemporary structure, based on an organization founded on the relationship between purity and impurity, with the violent line of untouchability that sustains it.

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