

...Of Reorganising and Managing Informal Labour

Mouleshri Vyas

The decade of the 90s in India has witnessed a turnaround in certain areas of governance; one of these is Solid Waste Management (SWM). The growth of large cities and urban centres, the burgeoning of spending power of the middle classes and heightened consumerism have contributed to a change in the urban landscape in more ways than one. In sheer physical terms, the quantum of solid waste generated in the cities has increased manifold while the machinery and systems to deal with it have not been able to keep pace. The interplay of governance and the treatment to the citizen-workers within a particular frame of development raises issues for interrogation.

One of the key civic functions of the urban local bodies (ULBs) in the country is that of maintaining the cleanliness of the cities, a function that is discharged through performance of various tasks each day throughout the year. The critical nature of this responsibility of the agency of the state is indisputable as a single day of its failure to do so would alter the cityscape and bring tensions into the state and citizen interface. However, as cities become global, the processes of keeping them clean are emerging through policy formulations that segregate and move the poor into certain sections and corners where they do not catch the public eye, and yet participate in the public function of keeping the city clean. Foreign investment needs a visible degree of development and of adequately managed cities.

Thousands of workers in cities across the country have been engaged in conservancy work for many years. Day in and day out, the drudgery of sweeping, collecting and transporting of solid waste is as embedded in their lives as is the stench that emanates from them while at work. As contractual workers, they are denied all basic rights such as a minimum wage, protective gear, paid leave and social security. As citizens they are denied access to public services and public places; as urban poor, they struggle for basic amenities at work as well as in their neighbourhoods. They live on the fringes of the city in low income settlements at times in abysmal conditions; the work that they do is clearly on the lower rungs of the occupational hierarchy even in the informal sector. However, the lot of the permanent workers with SWM departments of the ULBs is much better in terms of work conditions and social security. Both these worker constituencies are difficult to collectivize under one banner as the contractual workers are seen to affect the scope of the permanent ones to secure these jobs for their family members. So the system works in a way that pits one section of workers against another and cohesion can only be arrived at after navigating competing interests of both sets.

The wave of privatisation that swept through the SWM sector in this decade was introduced through the predictable arguments of efficiency and effectiveness in discharge of the civic functions by the ULBs. It was legitimized by the loud and

visible pro-privatisation lobby and policy amendments that allowed for a range of private agencies including global firms to enter the arena. The concomitants of this phenomenon are silently destructive and strangely ironical from the worker perspective: whether it is a global or local firm, the workers belong to the same pool. They are the Dalits, the socially and economically marginalized in the city where they work. Their spaces for staking claim to permanency or even decent work have actually shrunk as the very framework within which the work is now organised has been altered. The irony is that there are hundreds of workers who compete daily for these jobs within municipal ward boundaries. The micro politics of this tension demonstrates the extent to which the essential conflict between the state and workers has transferred base.

As larger and global business interests enter the SWM arena, the work space at times assumes a new and cleaner look...Clean uniforms, better equipment and a worker whistling while sweeping the streets. The policy governing management of solid waste, the rules and terms of employment are altered and appear more acceptable. The workers may be younger and their caste unknown. Yet, not many of them in this new contractual system would want to do this work all their lives; this job is often a transitory choice as it is not too difficult to get into. For many of the old hands, this is not a job that they want their children to get into - a thought that is a sure test of the internal acceptance of an area of work among a constituency.

There are hierarchies among different types of work in the informal economy; work with waste ranks among the lowest. Structural factors ensure that this work is confined to certain segments of society and the biopolitics that plays out in this arena retains and reinforces the existing social and economic relations. The state machinery in its employer role has been problematic; the challenge is with how it would take on a regulatory role. It is ironic that with the advent of privatisation, the critics of the state have become advocates of its active participation in management, regulation and control of the informal work arena and therefore of the workforce.

Ideas of social transformation through privatisation are therefore illusory. The biopolitics within the policy arena, the shifting spaces for negotiation between worker groups and workers and employers, the nature of conflict and relationships between different constituencies significantly determine the definition of work and of the worker. These are the points for discussion in the paper.