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Sanitation Workers—Expendable Lives in Times of COVID-19

The COVID-19 crisis has raised primary questions of sanitation and public health and has exposed the failure to tackle the inequalities and upliftment of those marginalised groups being engaged in the public health management. The paper primarily focuses on the lives of the sanitation workers and seeks to investigate the ongoing challenges. The city of Bengaluru being the field setting will bring in detailed narratives of the sanitary workers employed by the local body as well as hundreds of private workers working in the heart of the city unnoticed, majority of them being migrants. The paper looks into different aspects of work life of the sanitary workers, social security, entitlements, survival strategies, upbringing of children, and others in light of the current crisis.

The callousness of the State has left the sewer bodies to face the virus without any proper safety gears. The Personal Protective Equipments (PPEs) are considered essential for sanitation workers under the existing laws; COVID-19 has reinforced the importance of the use of PPEs. The PPEs also adds to the existing waste generation. This has created a new wave of waste accumulation and the collection, segregation and disposal tasked to the sanitation workers on a daily routine which has serious health issues and chances of exposing to the virus. Though they are entitled to social security and COVID-19 related benefits, these have not reached their hands and continue to suffer the abysmal working condition which has persisted for decades. They are historically facing such discrimination as they are socially and institutionally trapped in the vicious circle of cast-based occupation which is considered to be ritually impure and polluting.

The workers are vulnerable to all forms of discriminatory treatment by the public due to the kind of occupation they have been engaged which has distanced them totally from the public spaces. Public have always maintain physical and social distance with the sanitation workers due their caste identity and impure occupation that has encircled them; COVID-19 has further stigmatized and ostracized these invisible bodies creating greater hardships and suffering. The workers have been facing multiple crises since the start of the pandemic which started terminations, accidents and so on. The glorification of the workers as 'Covid warriors' by the State and its citizens adds noting but an empty slogan.

The narratives from the field will not only take stock of the crisis of the sanitation workers world of work exacerbated due to the precarious nature of work but also the hardships they have come across during the pandemic. The challenges faced by them are enormous, but it appears to be indifferent to their lives as they have been facing such exploitations for centuries. The legal interventions taken up on behalf of the workers during the pandemic will help to understand the position of the State, its institutions and the role of the trade unions and civil society organisations in its limitations. The paper will conclude with some immediate policy pointers and long term strategies to address the needs of the community.

Key Words: COVID-19, caste, discrimination, frontline warriors, pandemic, sanitation workers