

## **Caste and Labour Relations: A Case Study on the Impact of Covid- 19 years on Women Sanitation Workers in Delhi**

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*'Abstract: COVID-19 is an infectious disease which is caused by the virus named Coronavirus. It got spread all over the world since starting of the year 2020. In India, the government announced the lockdown to control this situation. Every Pandemic in history had bad consequences on society. The pandemic hit the livelihood, economy and vulnerable groups the most. In India, Covid-19 affected mostly the labour class, poor people, whose living and earnings are based on daily wages. The lockdown process limited the labour class's earnings, for example, Rikshaw pullers and auto drivers and street vendors hardly got any income during the complete lockdown phase in India. In this situation, the labour class were continuing performing their job without any delay, they were sanitation workers. Sanitation workers were doing their jobs during the lockdown phase without any health measures and were putting their life at more risk. The government came up with the rules and regulations for COVID-19 safety precautions but how many measures for sanitation workers have been taken? They are those labour classes, who clean the toilet, corridors and roads everywhere. During the complete lockdown, in the formal sector, sanitation workers used to work every day in a week. Women sanitation workers faced many problems during the COVID-19 phase in Delhi. The labour class loses more during a crisis. They lose because of their poor economic and social conditions in society. Women Sanitation workers are among them. Women sanitation workers have double oppression, one because of their gender and the other because of their caste. They have only a single sound in their life, which is the sound of making a broom every morning for their entire day. Sanitation worker life was already full of stress because of the caste system and caste pollution in society. This COVID-19 has also impacted their life in many ways. They have faced problems for example migrant women have faced house rent issues, livelihood and food and health risk issues. The health safety of sanitation workers was always necessary before COVID-19, but never realized by the government, for example, the need for gloves and masks during work. I will try to focus on some issues of women sanitation workers in Delhi: What are the challenges and problems women sanitation workers have faced during*

*the peak time of lockdown in India? How have sanitation worker lost their job in the informal sector because of COVID-19? How caste and gender played an important role in their life? How they are managing their livelihood in this period, for example: Are they getting their salary every month or not? What are the precautions and safety measures, the government have given to them? I will compare the life of women sanitation workers in formal and informal sectors in Delhi.*

**Keywords:** Women sanitation workers, Covid-19 lockdown, Caste and Gender issues, Safety and Precautions.

Covid 19 is an infectious disease which is caused by the virus name, Coronavirus. It got spread all over the world since starting of the year 2020. In India, the government announced the first phase of lockdown to control this situation. Every Pandemic in history had bad consequences on society. The pandemic hit the livelihood, economy and vulnerable groups the most. The United Nations Development Programme announced that Covid-19 is far more than a health crisis; it will impact society and the economy at its core. It says further that its impacts will be varying from country to country. It will most likely increase poverty on a global scale. (UNDP, 2020)<sup>1</sup> The U.N. teams started doing work on this in all 131 countries of the world to support public health and response plan to Covid-19.<sup>2</sup>

In India, Covid-19 affected mostly the labour class, poor people, whose living and earnings are based on daily wages. Sanitation worker's life also got impacted due to Covid-19. The lockdown process limited the labour class earning, for example, Rikshaw pullers and auto drivers and street vendors hardly got any income during the complete lockdown phase. Sanitation workers were doing their jobs during the lockdown phase without any health measures and putting their life at more risk. The government came up with the rules and regulations for Covid-19 safety precautions but how many measures for sanitation workers? They are those labour classes, who clean the toilet, corridors and roads everywhere. During the complete lockdown, sanitation workers use to work every day for a week. According to a report based on a telephonic survey of 214 sanitation workers in five states of India, it found; nearly 64% of 188 sanitation workers received no training related to safety from Covid-19 infections. 93% of 192 reported that they were not given any instructions regarding health checkups. 55 of the 57 said that no special arrangement was made for them at the workplace.<sup>3</sup> This shows that the life and health of the sanitation worker has not been taken seriously by the government and authorities.

Labour class always losses more during crises because of their poor economic and socio conditions in any society. Sanitation workers are one among them. The environment has different meanings for different people based on their caste, class and gender. This can be found in an example, where fresh air does not have any meaning for a particular caste, chirping of birds

does not impact sanitation workers. They have only a single sound in their life, which is the sound of making a broom every morning for their entire day. Sanitation worker life was already full of stress because of the caste system and caste pollution in society. This Covid-19 has also impacted their life from many perspectives.

### **Caste and Labour**

Labour is a part of society formation. Labour has been a source of living for human life. In Indian society, labour has been decided according to the *Varna* system, which is oppressive for a particular section of society, historically, called untouchables. After a phase of oppression, untouchables came together and fought against this humiliation. This consciousness led to a movement throughout India from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 20<sup>th</sup> century. But it still exists in different forms. India is a land of many religions and castes. It is a third-world country, where oppression still exists in the form of humiliation in the name of paid or unpaid labour. History tells us the facts of where the oppressed have faced a life, where they fought for safe drinking water. Revolution took place in other countries like America and Europe where women fought for their equal social, economic and political rights. In Indian society, *Dalit* women faces multiple time of oppression. For Example, *Dalit* women have been forced to do manual scavenging since the history of India. *Dalit* women were forced to do *Devadasi* Practices. Women mostly faced problems through the rituals. According to Vedas, women are impure during menstrual periods. In Indian society, all women have faced such minor or major oppression through the caste system and patriarchy, which restricted their growth since historical times. Dr. Ambedkar created awareness in all these women and told them their rights and worked very hard for them to implement in India. He worked for women's empowerment in Indian history. Dr. Ambedkar introduced the Hindu code bill to improve women's conditions in the Indian assembly. He tried and fought for women's dignified life in Society. He made such a provision in the Indian constitution, so, women must be treated equally in society. He was the one who studied well the condition of women and tried to liberate them with the help of his law understanding. He insisted on the Hindu code bill and gave suggestions on the amendments in the assembly and also evoked all the parliamentary members to support the bill in parliament. Women were treated as animals in historical times, if the husband died, then the woman has to stay in the Widow Ashram, where she hardly gets some food for a living. Women have two categories one was Hindu caste women, and the other was *Dalit* women. Hindu caste women have oppression for example; they had to face patriarchy in Indian society. But *Dalit* women have double oppression of being a woman and being a *Dalit*.

### **Sanitation worker's Struggle during Covid-19 in Delhi.**

Every institution affects the life of sanitation workers negatively. Three Women sanitation workers staying near Munirka in South Delhi were contract labour lost their job due to covid-19. They said during the first week

of April, they were fired from their job without giving any prior notice to them. Rani, a government sanitation worker told that she was going to her job from day one of the lockdown. There were no holidays for her. She works in a hospital; she hardly got any proper instruction from the authority there. Rani told me some of her friends got a fever during the Covid-19 time. So, they were not allowed into the workplace. In such a condition the workload put on her and she faced bad health conditions later. She could not even ask for holidays as she was the only member in her family who earns. Thus formal economy sector sanitation workers also got suffered during the first three months of the lockdown. Gita Didi works on a university campus. She told me about her condition during the first phase of lockdown. They got instruction from their supervisor and have given the safety measures during 2<sup>nd</sup> week of lockdown. For example, they got plastic gloves and masks. Those who are on contract did not get their Salary for the last three months from March to May. This made their life more critical for survival, she said. They use to get a holiday on Sunday before, but during this phase, they use to come every day of the week. 14 workers among 19 stay, more than 20 k.m. from the workplace. The work pressure got increased because of the cleaning of the corridor's floor with Phenyl liquid every day. Sanitation workers used to get breakfast and lunch in the mess. During the lockdown phase university students suffered a paucity of food and they got two meals in very less quantities, thus authorities refused to give food to sanitation workers, and then students asked the managers to give food to them. Sanitation workers also faced the problem of transport and timing hours. They have faced problems for example migrant women have faced house rent issues, livelihood and food and health risk issues. Those who stay in Mahipalpur and near 3 km, near the workplace, they use to walk and come. Female workers, who stay far away, come with their husbands and friends until the bus transport started. A sanitation worker's husband use to drop her off at 7 A.M. and wait till 2 P.M. in April when it was a very hot summer. I asked her why he use to wait for so long, and then she explained how they need to stay till 2 p.m. if they have finished their work in the morning only. Then all students wrote a letter and asked the authority to permit them to leave if they finish their work early. They got instructions from their supervisor and were given the safety measures. But no transport facilities were made for them. They faced health crises because, they use to walk for 7 to 10 km every day, thus these sanitation women workers faced many problems. A 40-year didi told how she was unable to walk after 3 km one day and still has to come to work the next day, because of their family survival. After so many difficulties sanitation worker did their duties and provided the best sanitation facilities in university hostels. They did not get their income on time; they faced problems for their survival. The student community helped them for some time until they did not get their income. Sheela Aunty is a widow, who works in a house. She got fired during the last week of March; she told me that she has not been given any payment for the coming month for her survival by the house owner.

However, she managed for three months. She said, that caste plays a very important role in this occupation as many of us, she adds who are doing this sanitation works belongs to the Dalit community.

A sanitation worker, who works in a mall, near Vasant Kunj in Delhi informed me that they got a regular salary during the lockdown phase because their union made pressure on the contractor. Reena Didi, who works as a sanitation worker in a government hospital got her salary on time during the lockdown phase. In the government sector sanitation workers were getting their salary every month, because of the organised sector. On the other hand, those who work in the unorganised and informal sector were facing problems in getting their salary. They faced livelihood problems during the first phase of the lockdown. Most of those Sanitation workers, who work in people's houses, lost their job. Sangita, a 50-year-old woman told that she was working in a house in Vacant Kunj for the past 3 years and the house owner asked her not to come to their home until the vaccine comes. They offered her to stay with them, but she couldn't meet her family members. So, in this situation, she had left the job. She had no option because she has a girl in her home alone. She worried about her, and she couldn't accept their offer. Thus many sanitation workers left their job in this situation of covid-19 during the lockdown. Sanitation workers are facing caste problems and oppression day by day. In rural areas, it is very visible. Most of them migrate from rural to urban areas but they still face the same caste-based oppression and humiliation in the city as well. A sanitation worker told that this covid-19 situation is most dangerous for them because our community will face more caste untouchability now. People already don't share food with us and make a distance from us, now this virus made the situation more worst for us, she added. Sanitation workers hope to get rid of this caste pollution, so they migrate themselves. The migration is on the bases of choice or forcefully. The fieldwork shows that the women sanitation workers in Delhi, where people are most educated and the country's capital, still face caste-based oppression. Migration also doesn't change the caste oppression for them. Delhi is a capital, where people come in search of a better opportunity for employment from Haryana, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh. If, it is an egalitarian society of independent India, where equality exists, where a group of the same society does clean the other human shit because he or she is born in a particular caste. Performing the labour has its own meaning for a particular caste where people get blessing and reputation in the society, whereas the sanitation worker becomes untouchables if they perform this sanitation labour. How did they get rid of this humiliation, if this humiliation is in the occupation or if it is in the mind, then the question is who will perform it if this is the only choice for the society? In the native place of these people, they only dream about getting a daily wage or monthly income. If they migrate from their native place, did they able to leave the caste-based forced occupation is the main concern of these sanitation workers. Delhi is the capital of the country and attracts people for education and employment. But, the

condition of labour there is a question. The whole concept of labour is based on caste and respect. Women and children's condition at the workplace is much more brutal, lower caste women who came to work for livelihood suffer humiliation at the workplace based on caste. It seems that concept of Izzat (respect) and safety is not for a woman who belongs to the Dalit caste, these women's life is free as objects in the outside world, how they have to face caste and untouchability at a very early age in the industries seen as the problem of child labour in India. The city hardly changes their life and arises problems in the everyday life of these workers. Workers migrate with their families. Family labours migrate themselves for months or a year on contract bases. They settle down themselves in a *basti* and manage their livelihood. If the contract work goes well they stay for a long time. Otherwise, they go back to their villages. The Covid-19 situation put the sanitation migrant workers in a situation where they neither can go back to their hometown nor have any job in the city. Thus, they hardly had enough money to eat. They suffer more because of unemployment and caste-based oppression than the coronavirus. A government sanitation worker told us how the guards and other peon don't share food with us, while we earn almost the same amount in a month. She says, how the economic condition is nowhere improving their social condition in society. I am still untouchable, she said. This proves somewhere that the upliftment of the sanitation worker is not on an economic pedestal alone but on a social one too. If there is a caste-based occupation in society which creates untouchability should be eradicate. A group of women who works as sanitation workers in an undergarments company says, we face caste when we eat food. We are not allowed to go to the main campus of the company, where the other workers eat. We have a separate room where we have to eat and drink tea. This makes us feel our caste mostly every day. During the lockdown they got a half salary, thus they faced problems due to insufficient payment for their survival every day, as no one is earning in their families. One contract sanitation worker who works in a private university told me that she had asked the owner to pay the full amount of the salary and leave for five days because she had her daughter's wedding in July. She did not get enough money. She said she works for more than 8 hours. She goes to work at 6 a.m. and leaves at 5 p.m., which makes her tired too. Also, most of the sanitation workers use Delhi government buses for their travel. They faced the problem of travelling until the bus services started in Delhi during the lockdown. During the lockdown, they used to come by walking from their home to their workplace. This made them unhealthy for the next day. Some of the organizations helped them for example in universities; students demanded and raised their voices for their monthly salaries during the lockdown phase. Organizations and unions made by sanitation workers also raised many issues of their everyday problems, so they can put pressure on the authority for their income and health measures. It is observed that sanitation workers in the informal sector faced much oppression. It is because an unorganized and informal sector doesn't have written documents and

follows any rules and regulations regarding the sanitation workers' income, hours and health safety. They can fire the workers whenever they want. They don't listen to their demands. On the other side, those women sanitation workers who work in the formal sector which is under the government and regulates by government authorities have more rules and proper regulations and written documents for workers. They follow proper norms so, the workers get their salary on time. Women in the informal sector faced more problems because of not having a permanent job there. During lockdowns and crises, informal sector women workers suffer more.

Women Sanitation workers faced many problems related to their health and income issues during the Covid-19 lockdown in Delhi. Women Sanitation workers already faced caste discrimination in society. Covid-19 made them more vulnerable because of facing these problems which has mentioned above in this article. Institutions and governments should draft contract rules and laws more in favour of the sanitation worker. Institutions can make pressure on the contract holder to pay the salary to contract workers on time. Institution authority should always keep an eye on the contract to check if the workers are getting their salary on time or not. The health safety of sanitation workers would have been necessary before Covid-19, but never realized by the government, for example, the need for gloves and masks during work. Government should provide basic facilities like machines for cleaning. Why a human hand is necessary for this particular work is a question on the *Swachh Bharat* Mission and Indian society, where these schemes talk about getting modernized every day. Thus the policy making and modernization process should be in a way, which will lead to the emancipation of sanitation workers as well in the society. It is a kind of slavery where these women are performing a caste-based occupation it is a kind of slavery. Modern slavery is different from past slavery because of its ways. Slavery has changed over time in a modern way. Slavery has changed its pattern, people are still living in a condition where they are not free and do not enjoy their complete freedom. The voices of such slaves are often silenced. Sanitation workers demand their rights and safety precaution, leaves for their emergency and bad health conditions, and equal wages on time, but they don't get it. It is a kind of slavery where these women feel themselves, slaves, in this system. Slavery has not been abolished completely in the world today. So, it should abolish one day. The difference and similarities between the past and modern history of slavery need to see critically and research again. Thus, people can see the real world and realise that slaves still exist and live in the modern world of slavery. The modern world needs awareness regarding the modern slavery practice to save the right and dignity of these people who are still living a life as a slave. However, people still face caste oppression in the name of the occupation. In a democratic country, Dalits are still living a life of humiliation. Dalit women suffer more specifically, because of their caste and gender identity. Dalit women contribute to the country's economy, thus they should be equally treated as human beings in Indian society. The Indian

women faced oppression due to their caste and patriarchy, which is based on an unequal society. Women started active participation from all the strata could make it possible for them to enjoy equal rights as men in Indian society. They get humiliation and threat by the dominant ones. Women were bound to the kitchen in Indian society, so it is a far vision to see women who are fighting and making organizations for their rights. Today women are living standard life, and social empowerment of women needs to be addressed first and given more importance; then only, it could achieve women's empowerment. Many Women are at present holding high positions of authority in all fields, Engineering, Medical, Higher Education, Defense and Politics. Dalit women suffer more, because of their caste and gender identity in society. It is observed that how in the informal and formal sectors how sanitation workers faced caste oppression. People don't share their food and space with them in both sectors. Thus caste pollution needs to eradicate from people's minds first. It needs more struggle and time to get more equal life for Dalit women. Thus these sanitation workers are those women, who are living a life where they are still struggling for their social and economic rights.

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7. Interviews with women sanitation workers in Delhi

#### Notes (Endnotes)

- <sup>1</sup> United Nation's Framework report for the immediate socioeconomic response to Covid 19. 2020
- <sup>2</sup> ibid
- <sup>3</sup> Nigam D.D, Sheeva Dubey. Conditions of sanitation workers in india; A survey during Covid 19 and lockdown, June, 2020