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| Author | 鈴木, 真弥(Suzuki, Maya) |
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| Abstract | <p>Upon gaining independence from British rule, the Government of India launched numerous initiatives with high hopes of building a "new" country on the ideals of liberal democracy. Recognizing the existence of problems of the so-called Untouchables—social groups that continue to be the poorest and most subordinated in India—the government has periodically introduced economic and social reforms. It was expected that in due time, stifling traditional values and practices like the caste system would undergo a transformation or gradual elimination, leading to a positive change in the Untouchables' social situation.</p> <p>This study aims to examine the status of Untouchables from the perspective of caste system related to social exclusion and inequality, while addressing the current aspect of the marginalization of Untouchables in India by reviewing the welfare schemes of recent decades. To what extent have the schemes benefited Untouchables and in what areas can such benefits be found? Can the improvements be considered uniform and comprehensive? Have the schemes been implemented in a sustainable and effective manner? Toward these ends, this study shall focus on the sweeping caste, known as Balmikis in northern India. Ranking lowest even among Untouchables and marginalized in society, Balmikis have continued to coexist by performing traditional jobs that are essential for the maintenance of the social environment, especially in urban areas. This study indicates that government welfare measures do not always prove to be advantageous; instead, these measures may foster marginalization. Sweepers' inferior social status arises from their "traditional" work-the job requires them to come into contact with natural waste-being considered "polluting" or "impure" in the orthodox Hindu belief. Hence, people in such jobs as collecting night-soil from latrines and sweeping streets and houses are despised as the bottom of the caste hierarchy.</p> <p>It is evident from the latest socio-economic statistics that sweepers remain underdeveloped and continue to be deemed "culturally" and "physically" unclean. It can be said that the sweepers' problems and the caste-based occupational structure continue to exist. As the sweeper community has a low occupational and educational mobility, this situation may indicate a relationship between the hereditary occupational structure and low socio-economic development. A close examination of welfare schemes for sweepers also reveals their slow progress, ineffectiveness, and the limitation of Gandhian approaches. Sanitizing the work environment does not always guarantee liberation from the stigma attached to the community. The Government of India needs to review these schemes to ensure that they benefit the Untouchables.</p> |
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Indian Government Strategy against Caste Inequality: “Liberating” Untouchables in the Context of Welfare Schemes¹

Maya Suzuki

Abstract

Upon gaining independence from British rule, the Government of India launched numerous initiatives with high hopes of building a “new” country on the ideals of liberal democracy. Recognizing the existence of problems of the so-called Untouchables—social groups that continue to be the poorest and most subordinated in India—the government has periodically introduced economic and social reforms. It was expected that in due time, stifling traditional values and practices like the caste system would undergo a transformation or gradual elimination, leading to a positive change in the Untouchables’ social situation.

This study aims to examine the status of Untouchables from the perspective of caste system related to social exclusion and inequality, while addressing the current aspect of the marginalization of Untouchables in India by reviewing the welfare schemes of recent decades. To what extent have the schemes benefited Untouchables and in what areas can such benefits be found? Can the improvements be considered uniform and comprehensive? Have the schemes been implemented in a sustainable and effective manner? Toward these ends, this study shall focus on the sweeping caste, known as *Balmikis* in northern India. Ranking lowest even among Untouchables and marginalized in society, Balmikis have continued to coexist by performing traditional jobs that are essential for the maintenance of the social environment, especially in urban areas. This study indicates that government welfare measures do not always prove to be advantageous; instead, these measures may foster marginalization.

Sweepers’ inferior social status arises from their “traditional” work—the job requires them to come into contact with natural waste—being considered “polluting” or “impure” in the orthodox Hindu belief. Hence, people in such jobs as collecting night-soil from latrines and sweeping streets and houses are despised as the bottom of the caste hierarchy.

It is evident from the latest socio-economic statistics that sweepers remain underdeveloped and continue to be deemed “culturally” and “physically” unclean. It can be said that the sweepers’ problems and the caste-based occupational structure continue to exist. As the sweeper community has a low occupational and educational mobility, this situation may indicate a relationship between the hereditary occupational structure and low socio-economic development. A close examination of welfare schemes for sweepers also reveals their slow progress, ineffectiveness, and the limitation of Gandhian approaches. Sanitizing the work environment does not always guarantee liberation from the stigma attached to the community. The Government of India needs to review these schemes to ensure that they benefit the Untouchables.

I. Introduction

Upon gaining independence from British rule in 1947, the Government of India launched numerous initiatives with high hopes of building a “new” country on the ideals of liberal democracy. Recognizing the existence of problems of the so-called Untouchables²—social groups that continue to be the poorest and most subordinated in India—the government has over the last half-century periodically introduced economic and social reforms: constitutional safeguards, a reservation policy, and educational and economic programs designed to facilitate overall development and eradicate poverty and social inequalities. It was expected that in due time, stifling traditional values and practices like the caste system would undergo a transformation or gradual elimination, leading to a positive change in the Untouchables’ social situation.³

In reality, it is widely recognized that some Untouchable groups are in a state of progressive transition, while others lag behind. Given the unequal development, what could have been the reasons for this?

This study aims to examine the status of Untouchables from the perspective of caste system related to social exclusion and inequality, while addressing the current aspect of the marginalization of Untouchables by reviewing the welfare schemes of recent decades. To what extent have the schemes benefited Untouchables and in what areas can such benefits be found? Can the improvements be considered uniform and comprehensive? Have the schemes been implemented in a sustainable and effective manner? An analysis of these subjects also extends to the uneven advancement and wide disparities among Untouchables. Toward these ends, this study shall focus on the sweeper caste known as the *Balmikis* in northern India and considered to be the lowest caste community even among Untouchables.⁴ The situation of Balmikis may be comparable with other similar sections in the society, but it holds a distinctive character that persistently ties the community with a conventional structure and degraded status. Note that, while marginalized in society, Balmikis

have continued to coexist by performing traditional jobs that are essential for the maintenance of the social environment, especially in urban areas. In fact, there is steadily rising demand for their services along with rapid urbanization in India. How has this impacted Balmikis' life? Most literature on the state intervention for sweepers has tended to argue that it is inefficiencies of the government schemes and lack of awareness of development among the community for the reasons behind the backward socio-economic condition.⁵ But it also needs to examine the current urban circumstances surrounding sweepers. Focusing on the relationship between caste-based hereditary occupations and Untouchables in contemporary urban India, this study indicates that government welfare measures do not always prove to be advantageous. Instead, these measures may foster marginalization.⁶

II. The Sweeper Community in India: A “Culturally and Hygienically Unclean” Community

Simply put, sweepers' inferior social status arises from their “traditional” work—the job requires them to come into contact with natural waste—rendering them “polluting” or “impure” in the orthodox Hindu belief. Hence, people in such jobs as collecting night-soil from latrines and sweeping streets and houses are despised as the bottom of the caste hierarchy. It is true that cultural barriers against Untouchables and distances that Untouchables used to have to preserve between themselves and any other caste Hindus have been gradually relaxed over the centuries.⁷ The Constitution of India bans any discrimination with regard to access to shops and places of public entertainment or the use of wells, ghats, roads, and places dedicated to the general public.⁸ The sweeper castes, in effect, have been comprehensively shunned in a physical sense and are uniquely despised across northern India.⁹

With respect to Untouchable's hereditary occupations, it may be appropriate to distinguish two categories: (1) death, and (2) natural waste. The first category deals with death (of human beings as well as animals). In Hinduism, death is considered to be so inauspicious that only Untouchables are to convey the news of death to family members, beat drums at funerals and other religious occasions, and dispose of dead bodies. The pollution associated with leather work is also placed in this context.¹⁰

The second category is concerned with biogenic waste such as human excreta, blood, and afterbirth. Hence, jobs such as sweepers, washermen, and midwives are assigned exclusively to Untouchables. Among them, one of the most disgraced tasks is cleaning dry latrines which are not connected to sewage system. Using brooms alone, workers need to remove human excreta from toilets or open sewers and carry the waste to dumping grounds. These laborers are generally called manual scavengers. Without any protective instruments, the working condition looks so deplorable and hazardous to the workers' health that it has often come to symbolize untouchability. The sight of manual scavengers at work tends to

move people and has drawn attention from social workers and politicians including M.K. Gandhi (1869–1948), who I will discuss in a later section. Emotionally appealing words such as “India’s shame”, “degrading”, “dehumanizing”, “a blot on humanity”, or “inhuman occupation” are commonly attached to manual scavenging.¹¹

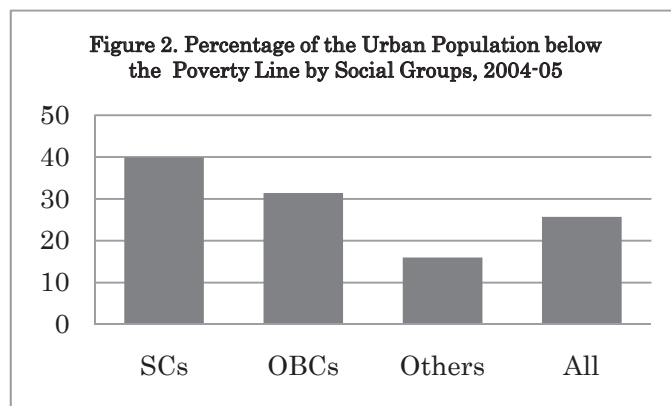
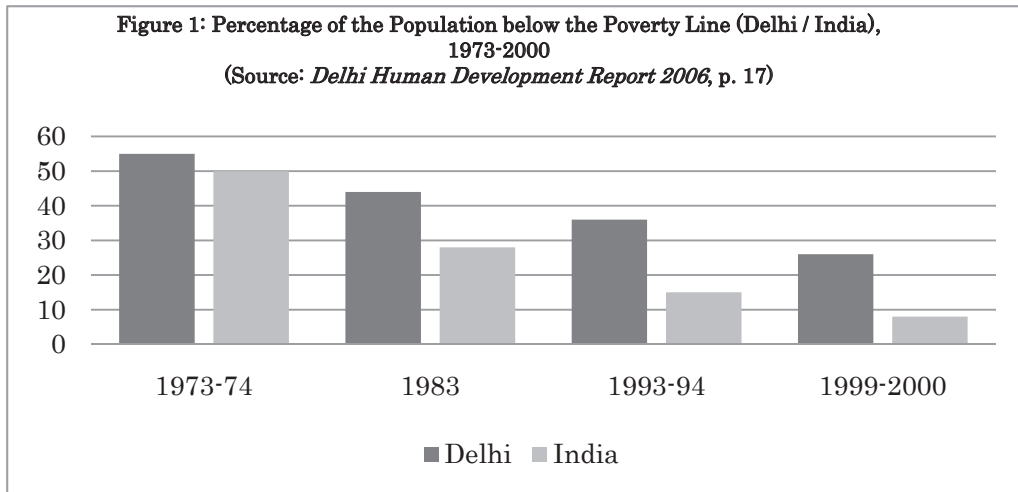
It is significant to stress that while such hereditary jobs largely require proximity to literally unclean conditions, their classifications are based on ritual attributions, not on an objective sense of sanitation per se. Despite this, what is even more striking is that such cultural classification and implication appear to be replaced by a rather “hygienic” subject in the context of welfare policy, in particular, where the government addresses the sweeper issue. In fact, as far as Untouchables’ hereditary occupations are concerned, the affirmative state action to free them from degrading hereditary jobs has been in evidence only for manual scavenging.¹²

III. The Socio-Economic Situation of Sweeper Community

In sociological studies, educational and occupational factors are considered as key parameters of social mobility. Of an effect of globalization, British sociologist Anthony Giddens states that modern industrial production requires people to move about freely, work at whatever jobs they are suited or able to do, and change jobs frequently according to economic conditions. It is supposed that customary vocational structure has undergone some changes, even toward relaxation with the advent of industrialization and urbanization.¹³ According to the existing literature on the sweeper community in India, nonetheless, proximity to the traditional job structure seems to be prevalent.¹⁴ For example, while the sweeper community has one of the highest percentages of urban migration among all Untouchables, a large number of them are employed as sweepers by the municipal sanitation departments or private institutions and households. This situation indicates that sweepers are still engaged in traditional work without much occupational mobility.

The following data (Figure 1–7) provides brief glances at the current socio-economic situation of Untouchables in general and sweepers in particular from Delhi, which is the national capital and second largest metropolitan city in India. According to the census of 2001, the population of the Scheduled Castes (SCs—an administrative term for Untouchables) numbers about 166 million, constituting 16.2% of the total population (1.02 billion).¹⁵

It is in economic status that the most distinct evidence of the caste oppression and inequality suffered by Untouchables can be found. Figure 1 presents the changes in the population below the poverty line (BPL) of all India and Delhi since 1973. There has been a steady decline in the proportion of BPL in India as well as Delhi. Despite this positive trend as a whole, it should be mentioned that there is quite a large disparity among different social groups, as we can see from Figure 2.



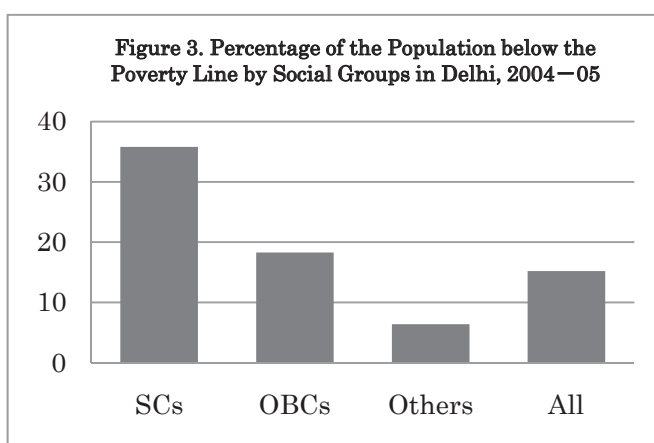
(Source: Ministry of Social Justice, <http://socialjustice.nic.in/socialg0405.pdf>, October 3, 2009)

Figure 2 shows the proportion of the urban BPL population among the SCs at 39.9%, which is much higher than that for the total population at 25.7%. Other Backward Castes (OBCs—an administrative term for lower castes¹⁶) are immediately above the SCs at 31.4%, then “others” at 16.0%. The contrast with “others” is particularly clear—the latter is less than half that for the SCs and the OBCs. In short, it can be said that caste based inequality is evidently reflected in the economic status in urban India.

The next data (Figure 3–7) presents a case of Delhi. With consideration of the highest rate of urbanization, non-agricultural population, in-migration to Delhi and educational lev-

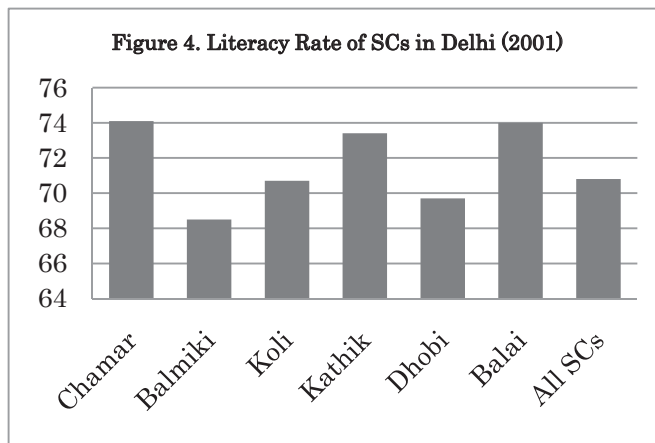
el as a whole, it is assumed that the average socio-economic state of Untouchables is to be mobilized upward to some degree. Despite this, the latest statistics indicate even more widening disparity among different caste groups than the national average. According to the census of 2001, the SCs number about 2.3 million, constituting 16.9% of the population (14 million).

Figure 3 shows the proportion of BPL population by social groups in Delhi in 2004–5. While the rate of SCs is 35.8%, that for OBCs and others are respectively 18.3% and 6.4%. It is undeniable that the greatly marked economic gap is observed between the SCs and other two groups in Delhi.



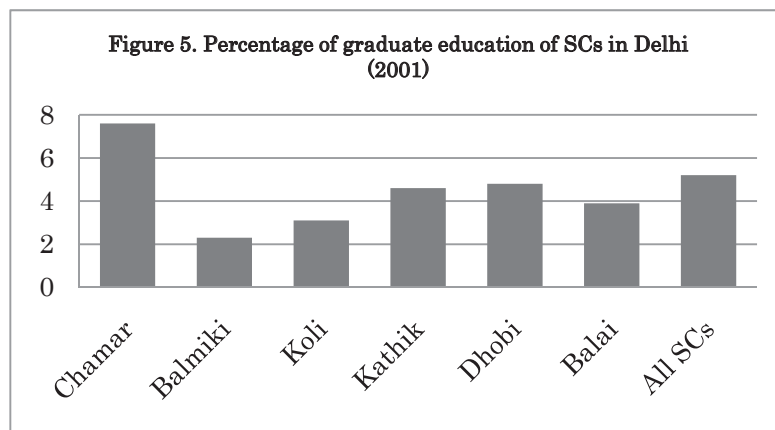
(Source: Ministry of Social Justice, <http://socialjustice.nic.in/socialg0405.pdf>, October 3, 2009)

In addition to the above economical circumstance, it is significant to recognize to what extent Untouchables have gained educational benefit through government measures. For a long period, Untouchables were denied access to formal education, which has resulted in high illiteracy rate among them. Figure 4 provides a view to educational advancement among the SCs in Delhi. According to the census of 2001, the overall literacy rate of the SCs in Delhi is 70.8%, which is quite higher than the national average of 54.7%. All the major SCs have registered higher overall literacy rate except for *Dhobis* (69.7%¹⁷) and *Balmikis* (68.5%).



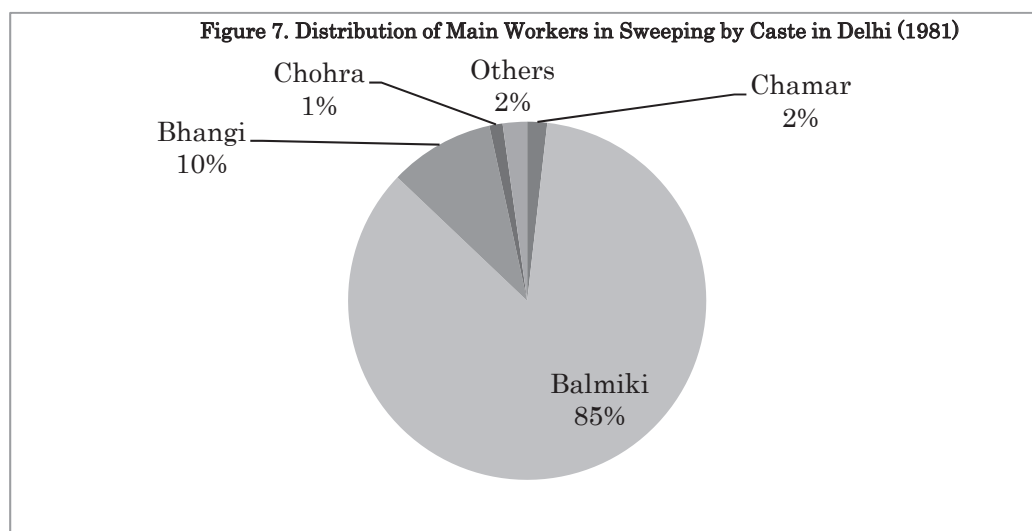
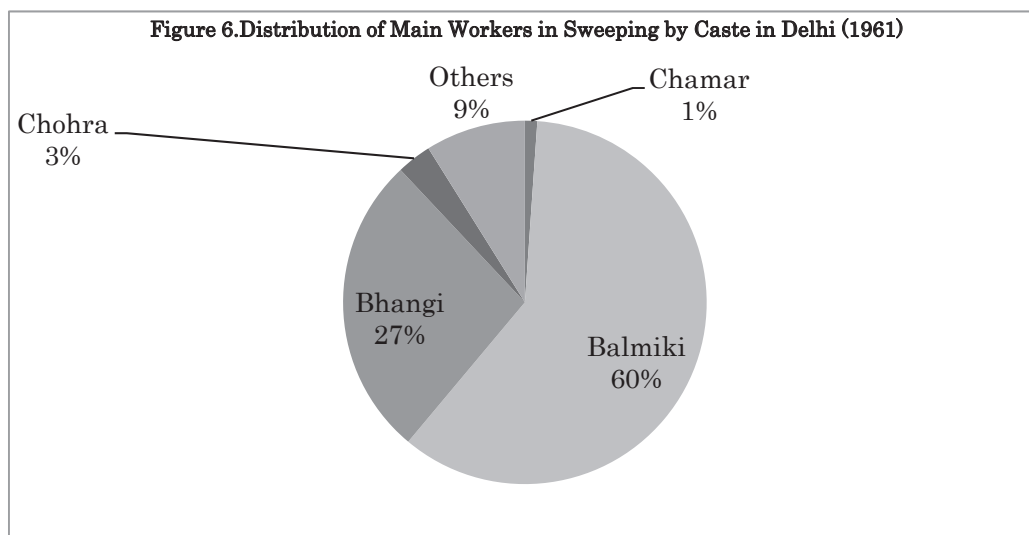
(Source: *the Census of 2001*)

Furthermore, Figure 5 is about ratio of graduate and above education by the SCs. Among the seven major SCs in Delhi, it is obvious that *Chamars* (7.6%¹⁸) occupy the relatively quite highest proportion of graduate education, while *Balmikis* (2.3%) is the lowest caste.



(Source: *the Census of 2001*)

Lastly, it is also significant for the socio-economic development of sweeper community of Delhi that the municipal sweeping jobs include a quite high number of a particular community; that is, *Balmikis*. Here is data of percentage of workers among the SCs, who are engaged in sweeping based on the census of 1961 and 1981. It would be noteworthy to consider the overwhelming trend of the caste-based occupational structure.



(Source: *the Census of 1961 and 1981*)

According to the census of 1961, 90% of main workers in sweeping came from the sub-caste of the sweeper caste: Balmikis, *Bhangis*, and *Chohras*.¹⁹ It was the Balmikis who occupied 60% of main workers in sweeping (Figure 6). After 20 years, meanwhile, the same trend of the caste-based occupational structure was observed again (Figure 7). According to

the census of 1981, 96% of main workers in sweeping hailed from sweeper castes.²⁰ Indeed, the concentration of Balmikis workers had increased to 85%. These figures clearly show that Balmikis including other similar sub-castes have accounted for quite large share (in the range of 90 to 96%) of sweeping jobs in Delhi during the 20 years. Moreover, along with such situation, I emphasize that there has been a gradual increase in the number of sweeping jobs, four times because of rapidly growing demand for public sanitation in Delhi. On the contrary, the number of leather tanning jobs which are also related to the Untouchables' hereditary job (especially of Chamars) goes almost diminishing according to the similar statistics of the census of 1961 and 1981. There has been no official statistics regarding the linkage between castes and traditional occupations since the census of 1981. However, a recent article published by a human right NGO states that 99 % of the government sanitary workers in Delhi had been from Balmiki community until 1995.²¹

In sum, it is clearly observed from these latest statistics of Delhi that Balmikis have been left behind development in aspects of occupational and educational spheres. Where these gaps are found among other relatively advanced Untouchable communities like Chamar, the sweepers' situation may indicate a relationship between the hereditary occupational structure and low socio-economic development.

IV. The Government Strategy toward "Liberating" Scavengers: From the Late 1950s to the Present

Addressing the empowerment of Untouchables has been one of the crucial tasks for the Indian government since independence. It has established an authority to define who should be categorized as the target group for welfare schemes and how they should be treated. As indicated by the official adoption of the term "scheduled caste (SC)" which devised in the British bureaucratic context from the late nineteenth century to the 1930s, in general, the basic concept of intervening Untouchable issues is characterized as elevating Untouchables socio-economically, and then integrating them into mainstream society.

The government interventions toward the upliftment of Untouchables are primarily based on two major aims: (1) to overcome the multiple deprivations that Untouchables have suffered in the past; and (2) to provide them with protection against discrimination in present times by encouraging their effective participation in the social, economic, and political process.²² Toward these ends, the state action has been implemented in three spheres: (1) legislatures, (2) welfare programs, and (3) national commission for monitoring and evaluating the performance. In accordance with the above objectives, welfare schemes have been launched for sweepers as well. The representative running schemes for sweepers are as follows:

1. Legislature: In 1993 the Indian government banned the practice of manual scavenging by enacting a Central legislation known as the “Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993”.²³
2. Welfare programs:
 - a) “National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers and their Dependents” (NSLRSD) [1980/81, 1992–2007?]
 - b) “Integrated Low Cost Sanitation” (ILCS) scheme [1980/81–1989/90, 2003–07?]
 - c) “Pre-Matric Scholarship for Children of those Engaged in Unclean Occupations” [1977 onward with modification in 1994]
 - d) “Valmiki Ambedkar Awas Yojna” (VAMBAY) [2001 onward]
3. National Commissions:
 - a) National Human Rights Commission (NHRC) [1994 onward]
 - b) National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK) [1994–2010]

With an overview of the state action for sweepers, it can be recognized that there have been sporadic attempts since independence: the establishment of enquiry committees, the welfare programs at the central/states levels, and the legal provision. It should be noted that the schemes have not always targeted the entire sweeper community; that is, they have been especially for manual scavengers among the community. In fact, in the decades following the 1960–70s when various enquiry committees for sweeper’s working condition were constituted, the government gradually began focusing almost exclusively on manual scavengers, who should be entitled to benefit under such reformation schemes only if s/he is engaged in manual removal of human waste, and not other filth. In other words, it excludes the other scavengers who are engaged in cleaning streets, open drains, sewage, garbage, or natural waste from animals.²⁴

The basic idea underlying the government schemes is to ascribe the lowest status of sweepers and the cause of untouchability to their “unclean” occupational nature per se—that is, manually touching and removing human waste. Therefore, the “liberation of scavengers” in this context means to free them from the unhygienic conditions. For this, a government-devised strategy, namely, the construction of new flush toilets is indeed technical and practical. As it is obvious from the name of the scheme (“Low-Cost Sanitation for Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers”), the objectives are twofold: (1) socio-economic upliftment of scavengers and (2) improvement in sanitation. That is to say, it aims at improving their workplace, not radically at destroying caste-based occupational structure or caste system itself.

In the process of the aforesaid welfare schemes, the first priority seems to being given to

the scheme of conversion of dry latrines into flush ones—the scheme that believed as the only way to abolish the hereditary practice of manual scavenging—and then followed by the scheme of liberation and rehabilitation of scavengers.

V. Evaluation I: The Poor Policy Performance

Despite various welfare interventions, they have practically met with little success. According to reports by the NHRC and NCSK constituted in the aims of overseeing the programs for scavengers and making recommendations to the central government, several reasons for poor achievement are pointed out in three spheres: (1) implementation of the law, (2) progress of replacement of dry latrines, and (3) rehabilitation of scavengers. They are summarized as follows:

1) Implementation of the law:

It is a time-consuming process and rarely acknowledged, let alone enforced properly. There are various reasons; that is, law enforcement of central legislation like the act of 1993 only depends on whether each state adopts the legislation passed by resolution in its own assembly (under clause (1) of Article 252 of the Constitution of India). Hence, the legislation requires a fair amount of time for it to be enacted on national scale. The fourth report of the NCSK points out that the act of 1993 is not being effectively implemented.²⁵

Another obstacle is the legal effect. Although the act of 1993 makes violation of the law an offence punishable with imprisonment for a term and with fine, it is not very effective. The state of Andhra Pradesh, for example, claims that there are no dry latrines in the state. However, a rural survey on untouchability conducted across 11 states during 2001–02 reveals that dry latrines are still being operated in some states.²⁶

2) Progress of the replacement of dry latrines:

It has achieved even more unsatisfactory results. The main reasons for the slow pace of the scheme are apathy among concerned authorities (local bodies as well as state governments), unwillingness of beneficiary households (owners of dry latrines), and limited reliable data submitted by state governments with regard to the number of dry latrines. Referring to the limited available data, Justice A.S. Anand, the chairperson of the NHRC (2003–06), asked each state government to undertake proper surveys to identify dry latrines that needed to be replaced.²⁷

Figure 8. Numbers of Dry Latrines Sanctioned and Implemented under the Low Cost Sanitation Schemes , 1980–1997

| No. of units sanctioned | | | Total sanc- tioned | Total conversion + construction completed | Percentage of perfor- mance of the total sanctioned |
|-------------------------|-------------------|-----------------------|-----------------------|---|---|
| conversion | construc- tion | community latrines | | | |
| 1, 950, 953 | 1, 487, 026 | 3, 463 | 3, 441, 442 | 695, 315 | 20. 2% |

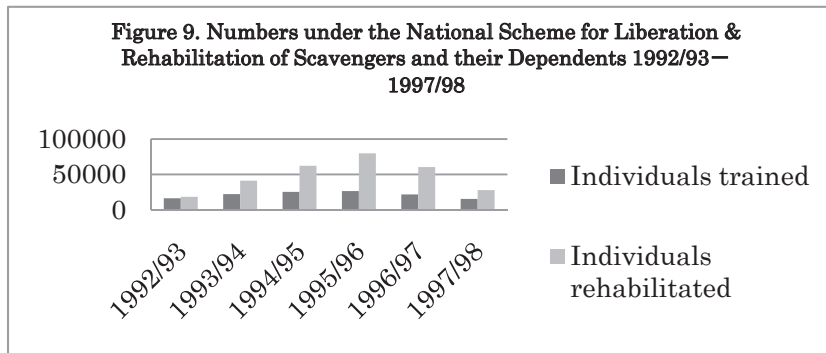
Source: *Report of the NCSK: Third Report 1996-97 & 1997-98*, p. 211.

According to Figure 8, it is observed that the performance of the conversion and construction of dry latrines under the low cost sanitation schemes from 1980 to 1997 has only reached about 20% of the total units sanctioned.

3) Rehabilitation of scavengers:

Likewise, there has been no positive change with regard to rehabilitation. The main components of this scheme are the identification of scavengers, their dependents, and their aptitude for alternative jobs. However, at least in the first step, most states and local bodies have not succeeded in providing accurate relevant data about the number of the targeted group. At a review meeting on March 18, 2007, the NHRC recommended that the state governments immediately conduct fresh surveys to identify manual scavengers.²⁸ Another matter is the difficulty in providing viable and satisfactory alternative employment to scavengers who would be able to give up his/her existing job of manual scavenging with consideration of income (above Rs. 2,000/per month) and market demand.

Figure 9 shows the progress made under the national scheme for liberation and rehabilitation of scavengers and their dependents from 1992/93 to 1997/98. It is recognizable that, after marking a turning point in 1995/96, the achieved number of trained as well as rehabilitated scavengers has gradually been dropping.



Source: *Report of the NCSK: Third Report 1996-97 & 1997-98*: 214.

The aforesaid problems are only part of the deficiencies to be addressed. When Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee (1998–2004) in his address on Independence Day, 2002, announced his government’s intent to expedite the liberation and rehabilitation of scavengers under the “National Action Plan”, it was declared that the scheme would be completed by the target year of 2007.²⁹ Due to the slow progress as I summarized, however, it was contemplated that the deadline be extended up to March 31, 2010.³⁰

VI. Evaluation II: The Government Strategy for “Liberating” Untouchables

In the previous section, I summarized the inefficiencies in the running schemes by referring to the reports of monitoring committees. In order to discuss further problems of the poor achievement of welfare schemes and marginalization of sweepers, I will examine the government strategy, especially by focusing on its close relationship with M.K. Gandhi’s idea and the intervention of Gandhians in the welfare for Untouchables. In most scholarships on sweepers, there is little explanation or follow up research of this perspective. However, it is noteworthy that they seem to be considerably relevant for the background of the low performance and limit of the government-led welfare programs.

Before explaining Gandhi’s idea, it is indispensable briefly to overview two key historical figures: M.K. Gandhi (1869–1948) and B.R. Ambedkar (1891–1956) because the controversies between them were crucial in the formation of the anti-caste inequality and anti-untouchability movements in contemporary India. While both of them attempted to resolve the problem of caste and untouchability, they differed as to how the goals should be achieved. In fact, with the arrival of these two leaders on the Indian political scene, the 1930s was the era when the Untouchables’ issue for the first time became widely and explicitly discussed as a national agenda.

M.K. Gandhi, known as *Mahatma* (a great soul), was the leader of the Indian nationalist movement against British rule and is widely considered as the father of his country. B.R. Ambedkar belonged to a Untouchable caste, but was highly educated abroad—unusual for Untouchables at that time.³¹ He is also well known for his work to design the Constitution of India. Both Gandhi and Ambedkar became barristers after completing education abroad, and then joined the political arena. In 1930 Gandhi began referring to the Untouchables as *Harijans* (children of god) and getting engaged in his own movement, “Harijan movement” for amelioration of Untouchables including sweepers. According to the idea of Harijan, Gandhi argued in favor of the inclusion of Untouchables among the other caste Hindus and persuaded caste Hindus to change their mind and moral in order to accept Untouchables. In the opposition camp, Ambedkar argued that Untouchables were to be separated from other caste Hindu communities and had to assert their rights and improve their political, economical, and educational circumstances by their own efforts. Gandhi was of opinion that Hinduism had to be preserved. Furthermore, he approved the reformed model of caste system based on the condition of equality of all castes communities and removal of discrimination against Untouchables.³² Meanwhile, Ambedkar claimed to abolish the caste system as well as Hinduism. These different ideological trends between Gandhi and Ambedkar have still been influential in today’s Indian society.

Once again with regard to the discussion of the government-led measures for sweepers, I can point out two aspects in close relation to Gandhi.

Firstly, it is about an affinity between M.K. Gandhi/Gandhians (followers of his idea) and welfare policy-makers since independence. For example, N.R. Malkani, the chairperson of enquiry committees (1960) and an opinion leader of the sweepers’ issue, used to be the vice-president of the *Harijan Sewak Sangh* established by Gandhi in 1932.³³ Moreover, it is not a coincidence that the government launched welfare schemes for sweepers on at least three occasions: Gandhi’s centenary (1969), Gandhi’s 125th birth anniversary (1994), and B.R. Ambedkar’s centenary (1991).

Secondly, the government strategy for “liberating” scavengers seems quite similar to M.K. Gandhi’s idea. In the context of welfare policies, the degraded position and untouchability of sweepers are attributed to the “physically” unhygienic conditions, rather than the “cultural” or “ritual” impurity. In other words, it has been asserted that the issue of the untouchability of sweepers can be addressed by eradicating unsanitary conditions from them. Based on this, the government has introduced two sets of strategies: (1) replacement of dry latrines and (2) liberation of manual scavengers since 1980/81. Actually, such strategy was devised on the occasion of Gandhi’s centenary (1969). At that time many Gandhian social workers participated in the sweepers’ liberation movement and spent much time on the reform of the toilet model. One of the Gandhian social workers B. Pathak (1943—), the founder of the Sulabh International Social Organization as NGO running at a national and

international level, designed an original model of flush toilet. This model has been approved in the government schemes.³⁴

From the aforesaid discussion, there can be no doubt that the welfare schemes for sweepers have evidently adopted M.K. Gandhi's strategy. Meanwhile, attempts at improving the sweepers' workplace as well as environmental sanitation would be expected especially in urban settings. As we have already seen the unsuccessful result of welfare schemes in previous sections, however, now is it possible to say that the schemes have adequately benefited the target group? Through the introduction of flush toilets, does it mean "liberation" of scavengers? Vijay Prashad in his work on Delhi's sweepers, persuasively points out the limit of M.K. Gandhi and Gandhians' solution; that is, it was intended to make sweeper's poor condition tolerable by sanitization rather than destroy the system which imposed subordinated status on them for so long.³⁵ Seen in this light, the concept of "liberating" sweepers needs to be clarified further.

VII. Conclusion

In sum, as I have already discussed from a case of the sweeper caste, it can be concluded that the problems of sweepers as well as caste-based occupational structure still remain today. In the second part, I mentioned the socio-historical background of the sweeper community in India. Initially due to Hindu belief, they have been invariably excluded from the development of society and have been constrained to remain in "culturally" as well as "physically" unclean status at the bottom of the hierarchy. In the third section, I described their present situation, especially from the perspective of socio-economic development. It is observed that the sweeper community remains low mobility in occupational and educational areas. In the fourth section, I outlined the government schemes for uplifting sweepers since independence. In following two sections, I examined the welfare schemes and revealed the slow progress and ineffectiveness of the schemes as well as limitation of the strategy based on M.K. Gandhi's approaches.

Sanitizing scavengers' work environment does not always guarantee liberation from the stigma that has been attached to the community for so long. The government of India needs to review the schemes to ensure that they successfully benefit the target group in a sustainable manner. Moreover, it should not be ignored that it is crucial to mobilize scavengers so as to attain higher-education and employment opportunities other than sweeping.

Finally, I should mention about the limits of findings in this paper and my future perspectives. This study is based on critical reconsideration of the welfare schemes for sweepers from the perspective of M.K. Gandhi's approach, but not from comparative approaches including B.R. Ambedkar and his followers. Although Ambedkar has been rarely known outside India until recently, his perspectives have become the mainstream of Untouchables' so-

cial movements. With its global spread, his name and idea have increasingly received attention from scholars and Untouchables' activists. Therefore, further research will have to be extensively conducted as to the prospects of alternative strategies against caste inequality.

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Notes

¹ This article is a revised version of the draft circulated and presented to the International Joint Symposium on Designing Governance for Civil Society, organized by GCOE-Center of Governance for Civil Society, held on November 22-23, 2009 at Keio University, Tokyo.

² In this article I have chosen to use "Untouchable" as a generic term that best suits the purpose of discussing about the people in question who are the lowest caste communities in India. There is a broad variety of forms, intense, and character of marginalization and subordination of Untouchables depending on the place and time. The choice of generic terms is complicated by the fact that there is no single agreement among Untouchables and non-Untouchables. While there are a number of alternatives including "Scheduled Castes" (as an official term), "Harijan" (by M.K. Gandhi and his followers), "Dalits" (in political and cultural arenas), and other vernacular names used by people with different standpoints.

³ The concept of a caste, generally in sociological and anthropological literature has been defined as a hereditary group of persons characterized by endogamy, specific occupation and more or less distinct custom from others. Caste encompasses hierarchical social stratification, known as caste system.

⁴ Sweeper caste consists of similar sub-castes and known by various local names. For examples from Delhi, there are names such *Balmikis*, *Bhangis*, and *Chuhra* (*Chohras*).

⁵ Singla, "National Scheme of Liberation and Rehabilitation of Scavengers and their Dependents"; Beck and Darokar, "Socioeconomic Status of Scavengers Engaged in the Practice of Manual Scavenging in Maharashtra".

⁶ Terms for scavengers/sweepers, *safai karamcharis* (meaning sweepers in Hindi), and *Balmikis* (caste name) are employed synonymously as a general identifier with the people about whom I am writing. In government reports, the occupational names *safai karamcharis*, sweepers, and scavengers are often used for this community. It is not uncommon that combinations of the occupational and caste terms are equivalently found in official statistics and academic literature. In this paper, the above names will henceforward be used for this community.

⁷ Caste Hindus mean to be other than Untouchable communities.

⁸ See Article 15 of the Constitution: Prohibition of discrimination on grounds of religion, race, caste, sex or place of birth.

⁹ Mendelsohn and Vicziany, *The Untouchables*, p. 38.

¹⁰ Shah et al., *Untouchability*, pp. 106-7.

¹¹ Ramaswamy, *India Stinking; Frontline*, September 9, 2006.

¹² Shah et al., *Untouchability*, p. 113.

¹³ Giddens, *Sociology*, p. 438.

¹⁴ Shyamlal, *The Bhangi*; Lal ed., *Social Exclusion*; Franco et al. eds., *Journeys to Freedom*; Shinoda, *Marginalization in the Midst of Modernization*; Singh and Ziyauddin, "Manual Scavenging as Social Exclusion: A Case Study".

¹⁵ The SCs account 11.7% of the urban population and 17.9% of rural population of India (GOI, *the Census of 2001*).

¹⁶ OBCs are regarded as relatively deprived communities in terms of socio-economic state (but not Untouchables).

¹⁷ *Dhobis* are considered to be a traditional washermen community.

¹⁸ *Chamars* are considered to be a traditional leather tanning community.

¹⁹ The ratio of each caste among the total sweepers was *Balmiki* 60%, *Bhangi* 27%, and *Chohra* 3% respectively (GOI, *the Census of 1961*).

²⁰ The ratio of each caste among the total sweepers was *Balmiki* 85%, *Bhangi* 10%, and *Chohra* 1% respectively (GOI, *the Census of 1981*).

²¹ *Labour File*, November-December 2005, p. 11.

²² Thorat, *Dalits in India*, p. 4.

²³ This act bars any person from cleaning dry latrines and transporting human-excreta, or employing any persons for the task, or the construction of dry latrines. Violation of this Act can result in imprisonment up to one year and/or a fine of up to Rs 2,000.

²⁴ The definition of "scavengers" in the welfare schemes has been opposed by the members of NCSK in the every annual report. Nevertheless, it has not been revised so far.

²⁵ GOI, *Report of the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis: Fourth Report 1999-2000*, p. 1.

²⁶ Shah et al., *Untouchability*, pp. 113-5.

²⁷ NHRC, "States urged to eliminate Manual Scavenging" (<http://nhrc.nic.in/dispatcharchive.asp?fno=636>, October 3, 2009).

²⁸ NHRC, 2007, "Review Meeting on Eradication of Manual Scavenging" (<http://nhrc.nic.in/dispatcharchive.asp?fno=1396>, October 1, 2009).

²⁹ GOI, Press Information Bureau, 2004 (<http://pib.nic.in/release/release.asp?relid=1030>, October 1, 2009).

³⁰ The tenure of the NCSK has been extended for one year, i.e. up to March 31, 2010. See GOI, Press Information Bureau, 2009, "National Commission for Safai Karamcharis – Extension in tenure for one year beyond 31.3.2009 (i.e. upto 31.3.2010)" (<http://www.pib.nic.in/release/release.asp?relid=48015>, October 3, 2009)

³¹ Gandhi was born in the *Baniyas* caste, traditionally merchant group.

³² To be precise, Gandhi approved of the *Varnashrama* system, which originally espoused in classical Hindu texts to divide society into four *Varna* (nearly synonymous term of caste) categories based on religious principle.

³³ Gandhi's welfare organization with an aim to persuade caste Hindus to abolish discrimination against Untouchables.

³⁴ See my discussion of "Liberating" Untouchables and a case study of a famous Gandhian-led NGO in "A Case Study of NGO and Indian Society for "Liberation" of the Oppressed Caste".

³⁵ Prashad, *Untouchable Freedom*, p. 112.

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