

Manual Scavenger Changes Her Destiny

Ms. Swapna MAJUMUDAR (India)

Choti Bai hates everything that is yellow. It reminds her of human excreta she cleaned in home toilets with her bare hands while working as a manual scavenger. Seven years ago, the life of this 44-year-old resident of northwestern India changed dramatically when she gave up this work. “I cannot forget the 22 years I spent cleaning dry toilets. Although I have quit the work, whenever I see any food or clothes that are yellow in color, I feel as if I were handling human excrement once again,” Bai said.

Life as a manual scavenger began when she was 15, shortly after she got married. As a child, she had seen her mother and two older sisters do the same work. Although she and another two younger sisters were allowed to go to school, Bai knew that they were destined to enter the family profession of manual scavenging as her community has traditionally been engaged in this occupation. “It did not come as any surprise when my mother-in-law told me to accompany my sister-in-law for manual scavenging soon after my marriage.” she said.

In India, manual scavengers, mostly women, are involved in cleaning dry toilets without any protective gloves or equipment and carry human excreta in containers on their heads for disposal. Men from this community clean septic tanks and sewers. There are several laws that prohibit manual scavenging in India. The earliest one was passed in 1993 and the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation, the more comprehensive ban, was passed in 2013.

Yet, it continues with 790,000 families still working as manual scavengers, according to the 2011 census. Dalits (the lowest rank in the Hindu caste system), especially women, make a living out of manual scavenging. Those who get paid can earn as little as 60 cents a day. However, most female manual scavengers receive no wages. Bai said she used to receive leftover flatbread, food and a small sack of wheat from her employers.

It was in 2008 that Bai discovered that manual scavenging was illegal when she met activists with the Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan (National Campaign for Dignity and Elimination of Manual Scavenging), a coalition of 30 community-based organizations from 13 Indian states, working to improve the lives of these marginalized communities. When the campaign activists visited her village and explained they were not required to do this undignified work, she and other female manual scavengers were skeptical. “I didn’t believe them. This was being done by all the families in our community. Also, I didn’t have any skills to do anything else. So I didn’t know what I could do if I gave it up,” Bai recalled.

But the activists didn't give up. They continued to speak to them about their rights. According to the campaign convener, more than 95 percent of the manual scavengers are women. He said: "They are victims of caste-based discrimination. So there was a greater need to raise awareness among them." It took eight months for Bai to decide to give up manual scavenging. She began working in the fields as a daily wage laborer and took to sewing clothes.

In 2010, when campaign activists saw her determination, they asked her to work with them. In 2012 she joined the campaign as a motivator, earning a monthly salary of \$75. It is not only the salary, which is far more than she used to earn, but more importantly, the dignity her new life has brought her and the respect she got, especially from those who had once considered her untouchable, has boosted her confidence.

Since then, as a part of the campaign, she has persuaded 112 women working as manual scavengers in her district to give up this work. While some of these women have been helped to start a small poultry business, others have been helped to get job cards under the government's national rural employment guarantee scheme. Bai says that now there are no more women manual scavengers in her village. So far, 100 such former female manual scavengers have joined the campaign as motivators and have been able to liberate 16,000 women.

Last year, Bai broke another boundary by drinking tea at a local tea shop, which had in the past refused to serve members of her community, with five women from a nearby village who had also given up manual scavenging.



Choti Bai, once worked as a manual scavenger, is now a motivational leader