Bodies of Accumulation
A Study on Women Sanitation Workers in Ajmer
Acknowledgements

The crisis of sanitation in urban India has two aspects. The first one, which is the most discussed one, is the lack of access to sanitation - more than half of India’s population does not own individual household toilets. This leads into problems of open defecation, the rise of communicable diseases, safety hazards and more. The second aspect of the sanitation crisis, however, is neglected in all discussions, both at the State as well as societal level - the plight of sanitation workers and their abysmal working conditions. This is linked to issues like the perpetuation of caste-based vocation, violence and isolation.

The continued dependence on the Valmiki1 communities to undertake sanitation and scavenging work is appalling, given the background of national schemes like Swachh Bharat Mission. Municipalities as well as private agencies source entire workforces of sanitation workers sourced from the Valmiki communities (Economic and Political Weekly, 2012). Their working conditions, irrespective of whether they are working formally or informally, are abysmal with very little or no access to protective gears, medical support, basic labour rights and dignity. The involvement of sanitation workers in the planning, implementation and monitoring of policies and programmes related to sanitation work or workers is completely absent. The neglect of their voices suppresses them further, rendering them as invisible workers and citizens.

The Society for Participatory Research in Asia (PRIA) uses participatory and narrative centric approaches to address this situation through ‘Bodies of Accumulation – A Study on Women Sanitation Workers’ under the ‘Engaged Citizens, Responsive City’ (ECRC) project supported by the European Union. In the prevailing situation, PRIA’s focus on narratives or the stories that come from the lives of sanitation workers, especially women, is critical to foster empathy among State and society and respect them as indispensable cogwheels of India’s sanitation system.

Data is a critical requirement to effectively seek interventions from municipalities, but is usually scantily available at the granular and qualitative level – especially in terms of details of the actual working conditions of the sanitation workers including employment benefits, occupational health, social security and emotional well-being. This study, therefore, focuses on accounts of lived experiences to enable an emotional understanding of an entirely neglected, ostracised and humiliated community. The power of lived experiences and qualitative narratives to expose the problems associated with sanitation workers, especially women, is a critical requirement to inspire empathy and coordination between the poor, middle class, municipality and other State stakeholders.

PRIA believes that one of the first steps towards such an understanding is to spread the stories of lived experiences, social isolation, political invisibility and economic depression of a community working relentlessly to keep India clean – keeping their voices as alive as we can. This is because in PRIA’s core methodology of participatory research, lived experiences is the basis of understanding one’s situation and surrounding relations of power. It is through this approach that people come together to change prevailing power dynamics. Such a change is critically required considering the lack of power omnipresent in the lives of sanitation workers in their places of work as well as across society.

1Valmiki (also Balmik/Harijan) caste, is a Dalit community who have historically experienced socio-political as well as economic exclusion, suppression and violence in India. They have been referred to as the ‘untouchables’ of the caste system.
To meet this goal, PRIA designed a narrative-centric (or life stories based), phenomenological study (or the study of structures of experience or consciousness) with women sanitation workers spread across the 60 wards in Ajmer. A mix of permanent, contractual and Rani workers were interviewed to ensure a holistic understanding of the sanitation services in Ajmer. However, it must be noted that the study findings below dominantly represent the status of contractual women sanitation workers, and not permanent workers or Rani workers. This is because permanent workers are relatively better off and receive some basic entitlements and security since the municipalities are direct employers and their condition have been taken to present a comparison between the difference of rights, benefits and securities. Rani workers were interviewed to understand the overall sanitation system of Ajmer and have not been included in the findings below except with brief descriptions of how the Rani system functions.

We acknowledge the support of our team in Ajmer consisting of Kirti Tak, Ramesh Yadavar and Vinit Calla. We are grateful to our dedicated team of primary researchers including Ganesh Narayan Choudhry, Zainab Farhat, Shankar Lal Choudhry and Dr. Atiq Ahmed who supervised the team through the process. Our team of animators including Sandeep Raj, Deepika Verma, Sajida Bano, Jyoti Khanna, Nisha Rathore, Sanjay Kumar and Sita helped identify settlements and organise interviews. The Settlement Improvement Committee (SIC)\(^2\) members facilitated local processes of trust building; we acknowledge the support of Rajkumar Hada, Khemchand, Hemant Deol, Savitri, Manju, Kamlesh Sangat, Poonam Dhuliya, Tikam ji Dhuliya, Rohit and Deepak Lakhan. Chief Sanitation Officer (AMC), Shri Ruparam Choudhary, spared valuable time for interviews.

We acknowledge the contribution and strength of all the women sanitation workers of Ajmer who welcomed us into their homes and shared their lives and difficult conversations with us. Their narratives are the backbone of this study. Dr. Kaustuv Kanti Bandyopadhyay, Director, PRIA, provided direction, guidance and leadership for which we are sincerely grateful. Lastly, this report would not have been possible without the direction provided by Dr. Rajesh Tandon, President, PRIA. We sincerely acknowledge his contribution.

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Kirti Tak, Programme Officer, PRIA  
Ramesh Yadavar, Senior Programme Officer, PRIA

\(^2\) SICs are representative bodies established with nominated residents of the informal settlement community. SICs can act as bridges between the service providers and the community. These SICs work as organisations that speak in unison about the needs and rights of the communities. They are the focal points through which external stakeholders can connect with the communities.
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<tr>
<td>BIMARU</td>
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<td>ECRC</td>
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<td>EMSCDLP</td>
<td>The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition)</td>
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<td>CPF</td>
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<td>MoSJE</td>
<td>Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment</td>
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<td>SBM</td>
<td>Swachh Bharat Mission</td>
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<td>SOCIO-ECONOMIC</td>
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INTRODUCTION

The sanitation crisis in India is obvious, understood, acknowledged but ceaseless. Despite India being the fastest growing economy, 65 percent of the population lacks access to adequate toilet facilities. Indian society is the victim of a cruel joke where more than half its 1.2 billion population has access to mobile phones but the same cannot be claimed when it comes to owning individual household toilets (Kelkar-Khambete, 2012). Furthermore, WHO/UNICEF’s Joint Monitoring Programme’s update on sanitation for the Millennium Development Goals (2017) confirmed that at least 40 percent of Indians still do not have access to toilets and defecate in the open instead.

The increasing pressure on urban India over the last two decades in terms of growth, migration, changes in family patterns and increasing number of slum dwellers, among other phenomena, have been making Indian cities brittle. There has been colossal failure in meeting the challenge of providing basic services, including but definitely not limited to sanitation.

The Swachh Bharat Mission (SBM) or Clean India Mission launched on 2 October 2014 by the Government of India came through, echoing Gandhian thoughts, to address the crisis of sanitation. It aimed to revamp the streets, roads and the sanitation infrastructure of Indian cities as well as its rural counterparts. It promised to eliminate open defecation through the construction of individual household and community toilets as well as establish an accountable system of monitoring toilet use by 2 October 2019, the 150th anniversary of Gandhi’s birth. In line with its promises, through SBM, 40,84,620 individual toilets and 2,34,161 community and public toilets have been constructed across India. Furthermore, 1,698 cities have been declared open defecation free while 100 percent door-to-door waste collection has been achieved in 51,734 wards (Swachh Bharat, Ministry of Housing and Urban Affairs).

Despite its good intentions, there is enormous scepticism about how successful SBM has been and how authentic its systems of evaluation are (Sagar, 2017). This report based on PRIA’s study looks at another missing link. SBM along with related policies like National Urban Sanitation Policy and The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and Their Rehabilitation Act, 2013 focus on making India clean. However, the people who actually make India clean, the sanitation workers, remain invisible in the participation, process or consequences of this national level movement.

“To clean the country, you have to address the problems of those who have spent a lifetime cleaning the country” – Bezwada Wilson

Why does India remain the world’s largest open lavatory (Economic and Political Weekly, 2012), in spite of one of the most expensive initiatives undertaken by the government towards sanitation? How does manual scavenging still persist (and go unreported) in most Indian cities (Sagar, 2017), despite a series of monumental policies such as The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) (EMSCDLP) Act, 1993 followed by the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Employment (PEMSR) Act 2013? Why is the question of indignity suffered by sanitation workers muffled and unaddressed?

The answer is simple but rarely acknowledged – caste. In India, there has been, and continues to be, an inescapable link between occupation and caste; the occupation of manual scavenging or any sanitation work is married with caste. This marriage earmarks sanitation as the sole concern of just one caste – the Dalits or the Valmiki community (Economic and Political Weekly, 2012). The entire country’s garbage
collection, road sweeping, and cleaning of drains relies on the most entrenched functioning of the caste system.

Despite a multitude of legal provisions including those protecting backward castes like The Scheduled Caste and Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989, the cleaning of drains and removal of faeces which was traditionally the vocation of the Dalit or ‘untouchable’ communities has conveniently been transferred to the formal sector. Entire bodies of government and municipal employees, which does this work, continue to be sourced from the same caste whose ‘calling’ has been scavenging of this kind (Economic and Political Weekly, 2012). This perennial association has caused an entire community’s lived experiences to entail emotional trauma of social isolation, invisible citizenry and economic depression. Before setting out to clean India, it is crucial to dismantle the link between caste and occupation – cleaning a country’s streets is easier than cleaning its morality. The fact that the same communities are cleaning our country for the last 4,000 years, confirms that campaigns like SBM will remain a pipe dream, as it is yet to include bettering the lives of those who actually make Bharat swachh.

An even wider gap of injustice appears when the Valmiki communities are disaggregated by gender. While the community of sanitation workers in India is suppressed and neglected, inter-state disparities show differing degrees of discrimination based on rigid histories of gender discrimination (Mehrotra, 2006). Women sanitation workers live in a country still mired in patriarchy, imposing the double burden specifically on lower caste women who have to work in order to survive. The unhappy kinship of gender, caste and occupation makes them the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. A significant angle of SBM was the ‘empowerment of women’ by building toilets, the titles of which were to be vested in the name of women (The Hindu, 2017). What about the Valmiki women who clean those toilets without proper gears? What about their access to toilets, to an emotionally and physically healthy occupation? Such initiatives become technical fixes as they do not capture the gravity of how problematic the social, political and economic standing of Indian women is. The amelioration of the same cannot be reduced to titling toilets.

Titling toilets in women’s names will not empower women sanitation workers – valuing both their jobs - at home and outside - might. Understanding the politics of who these women are, why do they do what they do, how do they do it, and what can be done to make their lives better might. Caste, class, gender and all other external and internal identities mark one’s body – making it dependent on the physical and emotional environment of one’s existence. Bodies accumulate these identities and evolve constantly (Harvey, 1998). The bodies of sanitation workers, especially women, accumulate so much (garbage, plastics, glasses, nails, syringes, excreta as well as rejection, invisibility, humiliation and sadness), that their bodies become tools and sites of accumulation. Their bodies are alienated and perform as the extension of their tools; divorced from the idea of letting go and living free.

Participatory Research in Asia’s (PRIA) history with women and work (PRIA, 1987, 1993; Jaitly and Vijay, n.d) since the 1980s led to the inception of the current study looking into the new discourse of caste and sanitation in reference to women. Keeping the issues of women and labour and the need to include the voices of

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3Double burden of labour is a term used to describe the workload of people, especially women, who work to earn money, but who are also responsible for significant amounts of unpaid and unacknowledged domestic labor.
oppressed communities in mind, PRIA conducted the current study, a participatory research to explore the lives of women sanitation workers. The purpose of this report is to explore their lives and expose the associated problems of dignity. Through their lived experiences, it attempts to articulate their voices and echo them through the state and society to cause ripples of discomfort and hopefully lead to self-reflection. The real purpose of this study report is to make the collected stories accessible to the wider society so that people begin to question their morality based on prevailing social structures and feel inspired to break them. This study report aims to curate life narratives of the women sanitation workers, map the socio-politics of their existence, the overlapping identities they perform each day. It aims to expose the lack of physical and emotional occupational health in a seemingly thankless job such as theirs. This study report hopes to not only give us an insight into the lives of these women, but also pave a path for instilling a deep sense of moral ethics which will ensure the sincere practice of sanitation policies and programmes and not just remain on paper. This report also hopes to reiterate on the urgent need of policies directly linked to sanitation workers and their conditions of work, as that is still missing from India’s policy framework.

This study was conducted in Ajmer, Rajasthan keeping a two-fold logic in mind. The first one was Ajmer’s ancient origins and the influence of Rajasthan’s conservative socio-political attitudes towards caste and women. Ajmer is also included in the list of Smart Cities – giving the study an interesting mix of the traditional and contemporary. The second reason was PRIA’s association with Ajmer where the Engaged Citizens, Responsive City (ECRC) project is being implemented for the last two years. The ready base of locally recruited leaders as well as the trust built between PRIA and the communities facilitated authentic information as this study is largely qualitative and relies on documenting the identity politics of the most vulnerable.

The report that emerged out of this study begins with establishing the methodology and the guiding principles of the themes that constructed the framework of analysis. The report then moves to the research findings followed by conclusion and suggested way forward.

*Please try your best to hear the voices of our women sanitation workers; we tried to keep their voices as alive as we could.*
METHODOLOGY

Research question

The study seeks to explore differing aspects of a woman sanitation worker’s life – all of which constitute her everyday reality. Following is the research question that guided the data collection and evaluation:

“To explore the lives of women sanitation workers and the problems associated with it, what are the predispositions and identity politics to be considered? Furthermore, how deep is the interface between these women workers and the State based on the status of their working conditions, rights and entitlements, and emotional wellbeing?”

In exploring this question, our analytical framework was based on related issues and predispositions, exploring the themes of gender, caste, geography and education.

“There are several contexts where identity has multiple contours, and every individual simultaneously has overlapping identities.” (Deshpande 2007).

We are born with some identities while we achieve some. Each woman sanitation worker in our study has been two people in her life; the one she was born as and the one she became. She was born with her gender and her caste; she gathered multiple identities through her external environment. It was, therefore, essential for us to explore certain predispositions in a Valmiki woman sanitation worker’s life before establishing themes for our analytical framework.

![Diagram of gender, caste, geography, education, and occupation interconnected for a Valmiki woman sanitation worker.]
GENDER is the first predisposition. It stood out as the most common and important variable across the sample of our study. Irrespective of caste, class, age, education, the female deficit in India (Sekher and Hatti, 2010) and its different forms and sources is something all women are acutely aware of. The social effects of this deficit and the undervaluation of women (PRIA, 1993), specifically of their dignity, could possibly be stronger in the case of women sanitation workers. Social perceptions of women as domesticated beings mould the role of working women. These perceptions institutionalise apathy towards those women who want to / need to break the public/private division of labour because it challenges traditional roles.

CASTE is the second predisposition. Historically omnipresent, caste is one of, if not the most, dominating themes of Indian identity politics. This makes the focus on Valmiki communities indispensable in our study. It was important to explore, through this study, the continuing adherence to notions of purity and pollution at a societal level. The dominance of touch-based discrimination in the economics and polity of sanitation work was a vital consideration based on the socio-economic and political oppression of Dalit communities.

GEOGRAPHY or the geo-politics of state and residence is the third predisposition. Rajasthan’s historic trend of eliminating girls (Mathur and Rajagopal, 2011) was an important vantage point to understand the role of residence in the lives of women sanitation workers. The continued practice of female foeticide was reiterated in Census 2011 that marked Rajasthan’s sex ratio at 926, which continues to remain below the national average of 940 (ibid). Policies meant to ameliorate the condition of women like the Pre-Conception and Pre-Natal Diagnostic Techniques (Prohibition of Sex Selection) Act fail due to Rajathan’s history of the overt desire for sons, and the severely low value attached to the birth of a girl, dowry, early marriage in and violence against lower castes. Cases of violence against Dalit women (Wadhavan, 2017) in Ajmer among other cities of Rajasthan strengthened the consideration of geography as an influential factor of social agency. It was, therefore, important to explore the linkages of caste and gender based politics with respect to location.

EDUCATION is the final predisposition. Caste becomes convenient in reiterating existing inequalities and the lack of education is the easiest way to maintain the imbalanced status quo. Gender inequality in access to education has been a common trend in India (Chaudhuri and Roy, 2006) and the access is further complicated based on caste, class and age. Socially rooted notions as well as the economics of a household govern one’s access to education. The role of education (or the lack of it) in influencing occupation as well as the role of gender, caste and location in deciding one’s occupation was an important theme of consideration. To understand the interplay of the social, cultural, economic and political is to understand the (lack of) institutional changes in favour of women (PRIA, 1993). Keeping that in mind, the themes that emerged out of the four discussed dispositions constructed our framework of analysis. By looking into the relationships between all four factors, a comprehensive analysis of women sanitation workers in Ajmer was undertaken.

Issues addressed
Some of the basic questions we address include the following themes:

Basic background
Who these women are and how long they have lived in Ajmer; their average age, level of education and basic background profiles; the type of sanitation
work they undertake, how remunerative their work is, their salaries and working hours.

**Social Structures/ Institutional Networks**

The entry points into such work and the ways of learning work; the different institutional factors and the way the changes in them affect the lives of these women and their children. The preference for formal or informal work among women workers and the kind of socio-economic pressures and types of discrimination faced by them as well as the networks of garbage in the city.

**Social Security**

The membership of workers’ unions, the kind of benefits that come with their jobs and their lives as sanitation workers.

**Gender**

The role of gender in their occupations, the various health factors associated with their work as well as their job security.

**Occupational health**

The role of employers (public and private) in facilitating a safe working environment; the condition of physical and mental well-being; the issue of drug or substance abuse.

**Laws, schemes and policies**

The access to information or the awareness of laws and policies meant to protect sanitation workers; the efforts of local leaders and officers in educating workers about their rights and entitlements and the effects of new policies focussed towards change.

**The data set**

This report reflects the first attempt to synthesize the findings from a series of personal interviews (numbering twenty-nine) with women sanitation workers as well as their employers, seven focused group discussions and shadowing exercises\(^4\) around women sanitation workers. The research approach involved a mixture of participatory assessments of situations through a sociological lens and phenomenology.

We began with a broad set of questions through semi-structured questionnaires specific to personal interviews, focused group discussions and informal discussions\(^5\). Throughout our research, we iteratively refined our questions based on emerging data through the narratives. We intended to describe the situation of women

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\(^4\) Shadowing exercises refer to being a passive observer of daily routines and schedules of the people being studied/ explored. It requires the researcher to melt into their daily activities like shadows and note the patterns and differences emerging out of the observations.

\(^5\) The questionnaires specific to personal interviews and focussed group discussions are attached in Annexure.
sanitation workers through their voices, thus their stories and quotes guided our research as well as our analysis.

Our sampling technique was purposive in nature. The dominant focus was on contractual woman sanitation workers under Ajmer Municipal Corporation (AMC) as their life and work conditions are very difficult compared to permanent AMC workers who are relatively better protected. Our sample of those women personally interviewed consisted of twenty-four contractual municipal sanitation workers, two permanent workers and six AMC employers and officials. (Three) Rani workers, while self-employed, were also interviewed to comprehensively understand the structure of sanitation workers in Ajmer. However, Rani workers will not be counted while generating our analysis as this report aims to look at formal employees under AMC. Thus, analysis related to all women personally interviewed will only refer to contractual women sanitation workers. The report will focus on the conditions of contractual workers and will instil comparisons between them and permanent AMC sanitation workers at appropriate points. Focus Group Discussions held during the data collection process also focussed on contractual workers and covered a range of 35-40 women.

Content analysis

The predispositions of gender, caste, geography and education guided our content analysis. Multiple and recurrent themes of the same emerged in the interviews by a process of systematic content analysis. Content analysis, in its broadest sense, can be understood as “any methodical measurement applied to text (or other symbolic material) for social scientific purposes” (Shapiro and Markoff, 1997:14). In the case of this report, the methodical measurement applied to the text was a matrix analysis, customised to anticipated themes as well as potential ones. Different researchers have emphasised different aspects of content analysis, from its ability to generate quantitative descriptions by analysing word counts (Silverman, 1993), to its capacity to dismantling text into discrete units that can be reorganised meaningfully (Silverman, 1993). However, for the purpose of this report, we were less concerned with generating quantified counts than with locating – through systematised reading and coding of transcripts – recurrent themes connected to the central triangle of caste, gender and vocation.

Further, we were interested in the patterns of relationships that might surface, especially those between women, institutions, education, and socio-economic pressures, under the broader axis of identity politics. An inductive and iterative research process was used in which our themes and categories of analysis were constantly refined by what we found emerging from the data.

Limitations of the study

Well known limitations apply to our research.

First, the insights available are limited to the purposive sampling. A large-scale study on qualitative life narratives required more time and labour, which the restrictions of this study did not allow. Second, while we tried to gather data from different types of sanitation workers, there is a possibility of over-generalising: that is a subject for further research. Third, human error can occur during analysis as the perspective of

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6 Rani workers or the ‘Rani System’ in Ajmer is an age-old traditional patron-client system where self-employed women sanitation workers or their ancestors buy certain streets to ensure their rights over their cleaning. The houses belonging to those streets pay the Rani workers at the end of each month.
the coder governs the accuracy of established codes and the same follows for their summarisation. Accuracy was checked repeatedly by going back to the original transcripts to ensure that the respective issues were recorded and examined exhaustively.

Fourth, there always remains, in both quantitative and qualitative research, the potential of human bias. While the extent of this bias can be reduced by constantly being conscious of one’s own politics, the complete absence of bias cannot be proven. Finally, since this study focuses on personal narratives as well as social ones, many topics that require a degree of trust may go under-reported, specifically in matters where the trust in the State and its affiliates is low. It is hard to report what a person does not say but hint towards, and while the researcher can read between the lines, the ethics of our study does not, and should not, allow interpretations of any kind.

Despite these limitations, we believe our participatory methods can reveal unique insights into the complex and diverse problems in the lives of women sanitation workers. Furthermore, information from qualitative assessments can give policymakers as well as the wider society a much deeper and humanised understanding of the socio-economic issues of sanitation workers, resulting in more effective public and personal strategies towards change.
RESEARCH FINDINGS

In this section, we will share the findings from the study using six kinds of issues addressed that would give us a holistic view of the lives of women sanitation workers. We will first present the basic profile background, including the demographic details and educational status. Then we will discuss the social and institutional networks followed by access to social security – both of which govern the entry of women into sanitation work and the socio-economic pressure points affecting them. After that is a perspective on the worker’s life through a gender lens highlighting the tangible and non-tangible effects of their biology, followed by related issues of occupational health. Finally, we discuss the access to information regarding laws, schemes and policies meant to protect women workers and the interface between them and their local leaders.

BASIC PROFILE BACKGROUND

“(yeh kaam) bachpan se karte aaye hai” (‘We have been doing this work since childhood”) – FGD6

Eighty-three percent of all women sanitation workers personally interviewed fell in the age bracket of thirty one to fifty years, the majority being between the ages of forty-one and fifty years. All of them belonged to the Valmiki caste, which has experienced socio-political isolation as well as economic discrimination, exclusion, suppression and violence. According to Census, 2011, there is a stark imbalance of literacy rate between men (79.19%) and women (52.12%) in Rajasthan. This extends to Ajmer district, where male literacy goes up to 82.44% and female literacy is significantly lower at 55.68%. Our study showed that Valmiki women are worse off. Though there were a few cases of women who had studied until the fifth standard and above, 77% of the women personally interviewed and all women in the focus group discussions were illiterate.

“Nobody used to educate girls in those days, and my family very poor” – PI 11
“My teacher used to beat me a lot so I left my school.” – PI 5
“I dropped out of school” – PI 12
“My parents wanted me to marry. I wanted to study and become nurse.” – PI 19

The correlation between caste and education surfaced in most of our conversations. The issue of early marriage as well as the need for the daughters of the house to give up education to help their mothers in sanitation work were dominant realities. While most cases exhibited a clear discrimination against access to education for women, some cases showed the continued lack of professional agency despite access to education.

“humari jaldi shaadi kar dete hai isiliye padhai bhi puri nahi ho pati...lekin mai apni gudiya ko padhna rahi hu” (our families marry us off early because of which we cannot complete out studies. But I am making my little girl study) – FGD 6
“Earlier I used to do private work of cleaning since childhood in Jaipur.” – PI 3
“I also wish to go to higher level. I have been working this since childhood, I won’t get any other work” – PI 16
“I was the eldest, so that support my family I had to quit my study.” – PI 10
“My son studied till class 10th, he can do basic work and is good in Maths... but he also works under contract with AMC because there are no jobs for us” – FGD 7

The Valmiki community continues to face discrimination in education at all levels, and the emotional humiliation of caste segregation leads to a high dropout rate (Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust, 2014). The relationship between caste and education
influence each other, perpetuating the historic violation of basic rights of the Valmiki community.

Most of the individually interviewed women have been living in Ajmer for over a decade – 77% for over 20 years. All respondents of our focussed group discussions claimed their communities have been living in Ajmer for over three to four generations, especially those who work as Rani workers apart from their contractual work with the AMC. The historical presence of the Rani system established a strong patron-client system in the ancient city and rapid urbanisation has not been able to change that, albeit has reduced it. Many women admitted to squeezing in an hour’s Rani work between the two rounds of working shifts under contractual work. This, they explained, was not a matter of money as Rani work barely amounts to Rs. 400-500 per month from one’s respective street. The reason they still tried to work as Ranis despite having formal jobs is to maintain relationships with the households from the respective streets. These women themselves, or their ancestors, ‘bought’ certain streets and the households within it, securing rights to their cleaning by paying a certain amount of money to those who fix these systems. This is why, they are called ‘Ranis’ or queens of the streets. Their relationships with the households of the streets they have bought have been going on for generations, from when a lot of formal work did not exist. To honour such relationships, some women still go to clean their bought streets and balance that during the breaks they receive between the first and second work shift under AMC.

Type of work, wages and hours

Despite the pay as well as benefits differing vastly among permanent and contractual sanitation workers, the type of work done by them are very similar. Sweeping streets, clearing garbage from smaller nallahs (drains), thela bharna/chalana (collecting garbage on a cart and pulling the cart, and emptying it into AMC installed dustbins or certified dumping areas) are the dominant tasks carried out by women. On probing regarding manual scavenging, it was clarified that only male sanitation workers cleaned bigger nallahs or septic tanks – this was a strictly gendered domain. Those working as permanent staff under the AMC earn approximately Rs. 25 – 30,000 a month while those working as municipal contractual workers earn only Rs. 5,500 per month. The figure for permanent workers are approximate due to the variations reflected in the data based on those availing certain benefits like Pension Contribution, Central Provident Fund (CPF) or other benefits that will be discussed ahead. While permanent workers under the municipality have the option of availing multiple such benefits, contractual workers face severe vulnerability since they earn very little money with no benefits whatsoever. “They only pay for work. I pay for the other things like I have to buy brooms which costs 100 rupees each and have to buy 3 per month. Apart from it I don’t get anything insurance, medical... On Sunday, we have only one shift. They don’t give us any kits. We have to travel to our workplace. Usually I walk on my own because, I don’t have much to pay for the travel.” – PI 2 (contractual worker)

“If I will get good salary and I will give proper education to my children. I will build my own house. I will get five times more money in permanent job.” – PI 19

What is of concern is the lack of information about salary structures in the case of permanent workers and the very availability of payslips among contractual workers. While working for around eight hours a day between a morning and afternoon shift, their knowledge regarding the structure of their salary is limited to cash based transactions (in case of contractual) and bank transfers (in case of permanent) in the beginning of each month. Permanent workers personally interviewed as well as interviews with AMC staff confirmed that they regularly receive payslips, however their knowledge about the break-up of their salaries or the deductions based on
benefits availed are very limited. All women working as contractual workers denied having received any payslips despite being in the sector of formal workers. According to Section 18(3) of the Minimum Wages Act, 1948, the appropriate government should issue wage slips or wage books to employed workers in any scheduled employment for which minimum wages have been fixed. While the government may not be direct employers of contractual workers, their certification of private contractors to hire contractual sanitation workers places a moral obligation to ensure such procedures aimed at worker’s safety and awareness.

“Only 5500. We don’t give them salary slips.” – Employer PI 1 (Jamadar)

A contractual worker’s salary is based on 26 days of a month – leaving 4 days of holiday. These holidays are not necessarily Sundays, although they could be. The holidays depend on how many workers are required in specific areas on Sundays, and are often rotated in a way that lends around two Sunday offs and two offs on any other day of the week a month. Many women specifically mentioned that holiday adjustments depended on the benevolence of the supervisors. Such benevolence is also effected by as well as encourages nepotism in the lower rungs of sanitation workers. Most women said that new contractual workers were hired on the basis of familial connections and supervisors often recruited members of their family or extended family when new vacancies arose. The women workers also claimed that sanitation workers with such connections with the supervisors were able to adjust their holidays conveniently and perhaps even get more than 4 holidays in case of personal exigencies/ reasons while those without could not. Multiple women mentioned the problem of ‘shadow workers’ in permanent as well as contractual work, where those enlisted under AMC’s permanent and contractual work are able to evade working regularly through nepotism and personal relationships.

“But there is politics in permanent vacancies. There will be lot of corruption and nepotism. A kind of nepotism exists in contractual, where contractors and supervisors make their relatives shadow workers. There are workers from their families who have never visited garbage depot but are getting salary. We are doing their share of work. Officers also do these types of work. Yes, they exploit newcomers, those who don’t speak have to face exploitation.” – PI 18

“Yes, it happens, jamadar (on site supervisor) favour his known or relatives” – FGD 2

“Till 1986 there had been regular recruitment but now they have stopped recruiting new people. Now contract system has started. There is a lot of politics behind it.” – Employer PI 1 (Jamadar).

This discussion above as well as further analysis of the data matrix highlights three main issues in this section:

a) Contractual women sanitation workers have very little knowledge about the structure of their salaries and the lack of payslips only strengthens that limitation. The dominance of illiteracy further disables their ability to understand details of such technicalities as well as the ability to challenge such lags at an institutional level.

b) While permanent women workers do receive their payslips regularly, those interviewed personally admitted to having no knowledge about the breakup of their salaries or the schemes availed under their names that deduct a certain amount of money each month from their salaries.
c) A payslip is a right for all formal employees, and it is problematic if workers under contract or outsourced by government approved agencies do not receive them.

d) The prevalence of nepotism and shadow workers is toxic for any working system. It manifests corruption, exploitation and brings in more layers in what is already an unhealthy power dynamics of the caste system in sanitation work.

SOCIAL STRUCTURES AND INSTITUTIONAL NETWORKS

Entry Into and Learning Sanitation Work

"We are doing this work from generations, in a way we have inherited it from generations."
– FGD1

Five major principles define the caste system: marriage within one’s caste, restricted socialisation with upper castes, hereditary membership within one’s caste, adherence to caste-based vocation and the ranking of castes into a hierarchy (Rahul, 2015).

Our analysis confirms the same principles and its effect on entry points into sanitation work in Ajmer. Caste, poverty and marriage are the three main reasons for entry into sanitation work. Through the conversations probed by our interviews, a clearer understanding of the inter-relation among the three factors emerged. The Valmiki community, as a caste historically alienated from the wider Indian society continues to stick to its caste-based vocation - that of cleaning and scavenging. The lack of dignity of labour is influenced by and encourages a hostile attitude towards Valmiki communities across India. The lack of dignity of labour also affects the level of remuneration, keeping them poor and unable to afford urban rents and better residential areas. The cumulative effect is that caste identity, coupled with economic depression reinforce each other – keeping the Valmiki community in the tight shackles of poverty. Such depressing reinforcements have also caused the problem of widespread alcoholism among the men in the Valmiki communities of Ajmer. Since male sanitation workers are sent into sewers, septic tanks and drains for their thorough cleaning, the consumption of alcohol becomes the only way to tolerate the filth. Most of these men fall prey to the regular consumption of alcohol for that reason, and this causes them to default on their work as well as domestic duties. Many women interviewed explained that this forces the women of the house to take up sanitation work to contribute to the household’s income as well as face domestic violence at home.

“Husband is too much into alcohol and my mother in law troubles too much so I have to take up this job.” – PI 25

“I work to get livelihood, for education of children, because my husband doesn’t earn anything. I have to take care of everything.” – PI 9

“There was nothing for livelihood other than this work. Earlier I didn't know anything about it. I started with 22 rupees.” // “my father died and we were very poor. I wanted to study but could not do due to family circumstances.” – PI 6

“Nobody from other caste will come to work this, God has made us for this work. Our caste is only meant for it. We have to do this work only.” – FGD 3
“hum padhe likhe nahi hai, aur koi kaam nahi hai life mein" // “ab jo kaam hai woh toh kaam hai” (we are not educated, we do not have any other work in life // now the work that is ours, is the work that is ours) – FGD 7

“I have a son and a daughter. My daughter is married off and her husband is a drunkard. My son is also drunkard. He doesn't do anything. They never helped me in my work. I don’t want my children to bring in this work. I am the only bread winner in my family. I have 2 grand daughters, I take care of them. My son’s wife had left him because of this habit of alcohol consumption. My husband had been Nigam worker. He married two women. My granddaughters are divorced, because their husbands are drunkard.” – PI 11

The lack of social, economic and political agency along with the lack of education ensures the perpetuation of the caste-based occupation and gathers a sense of ‘destiny’ among these women who accept their work as what they are meant to do. The reality of resigning oneself to one’s caste as one’s identity surfaced overwhelmingly through each interview.

When asked how they learnt sanitation work, the most common response was learning by watching and taking guidance from family/ friends members involved in the work as well as supervisors. None of the women received any proper training before beginning their jobs, all skills were acquired on the job through colleagues or as a part of intergenerational knowledge and experience. Many women said the only way to learn was learning by doing and admitted to having made mistakes, experienced bruises, accidents and rebukes.

“We have learned this work like child learn walk” – FGD 1

Caste-based occupations are carried forward through generations, with parents inheriting the occupation of their ancestors (Singh, 2010). The continuation of such inter-generational cycles was confirmed in our study, with more than 50% women admitting to having learnt sanitation work by watching their parents in their jobs through childhood. All women also expressed the use of their ‘previous gendered experience as girls’ in their paternal homes where all the cleaning and cooking was expected out of them while their brothers went to school or did odd jobs. Such remarks strengthened the intersection of caste, occupation and gender roles and the constant recycling of the same. Such inter-sectionalities put women sanitation workers in an even more vulnerable position as their chance of entry into different professions are based on better education. A better education is based on the social and economic standing of one’s caste and gender – thus establishing a cause and effect based relationship that is difficult to escape.

“I have learned it in my childhood, then I learned through experience now. By doing this job, my hands become very dry.” – PI 19

“When anybody is new, all want to take charge of them. The time teaches us to do everything, we faced rebuke, bad words and also comments on our profession, but time is the best healer. Nobody teach us to work.” – PI 21

“Nobody teaches us, we work on our own and also from our seniors.” – PI 25

Preference for Informality/Formality and Aspirations for Children

All women who were interviewed said if given a choice between formal and informal jobs, they would prefer formal jobs, specifically permanent jobs under the municipality. For over twenty years, AMC has not recruited any permanent workers and has only been outsourcing sanitation work to contractors who hire workers at unsustainable salaries. This emerged as a severe grievance among all women who are meeting ends rupee by rupee to run their households on Rs. 5500 a month, especially those households where the woman sanitation worker is the only earning member.
“They (contractual workers) get very less salary. They get only 211 rupees per day for their work. It should be at least 300 rupees per day even worker in Kishangarh get good salary around (9000). It has been 27 years that no permanent recruitment took place. Many have turned old and many have died waiting for the recruitment.” // “There is no policy for them which can advance their career.” – Employer PI 1 (Jamadar)

“Yes, I would like be become formal permanent worker. It will be support of our age and livelihood. What can we do in 5000?!” – PI 7

“They should increase our payment. We work so hard and get very little in return, nobody sees us with respect. What we can do with only 5000 in a month?” – PI 10

“I get only 5000 per month. I don’t get any bonus. I don’t get anything. The house rent goes on 2000” – PI 22

The most common reasons for preferring formal jobs under the municipality were higher salary which would help them to educate their children for a brighter future, job security and the ability to pass on one’s job to a family member in the event of death. The notion of security associated with formal permanent jobs was also associated with the women and their children’s future.

The study brought to the fore many contradictions as well as clarifications. The dominant aspiration was to ensure their children are educated and find better paying and more respectable jobs. This desire is understandable as Valmiki children have the tendency of dropping out of schools to join their parents in work (Jodhka and Shah, 2010). But precisely because of this and their scepticism towards an unsympathetic government keeps them tied to their existing reality and makes them want to protect their vocation for their children, as a backup livelihood option.

On an average, women had three children each. The group discussions revealed that while the majority of the younger children go to school, those above eighteen years often help their mothers with sanitation jobs. However, based on the personal interviews, 15 percent of the children studying also skip school and help their mothers frequently, confirming the drop out trend among Valmiki children. Fifteen percent of the children of the personally interviewed women do not go to school at all. The children of 19% of the interviewed women have entered the same profession of sanitation work. Furthermore, there is rampant unemployment plaguing the young adults of their communities despite being educated. Further probing revealed a common grievance of no support from the state for children from a vulnerable community.

“I have two sons of 15 and 13 and a daughter of 18 years old. They sometimes help me in my work. They are studying. My youngest child is working same work, and remaining two are studying. I don’t want to bring my children in this work” – PI 15

“My daughters help me in this. We have spent our life in doing this work. I get an extra amount of around 1500 rupees which I along with my daughter do as maids, apart from municipal job. But I don’t want my children to come to this profession” – PI 17

“I could not educate them due to poverty. Now education becomes only money oriented.”
– PI 8

“I have 5 sons, eldest is 32 and youngest is 22 years old. Two among them are in same profession and three are unemployed. I prefer them not to work in this profession” – PI 7

“I have three sons of 17, 16 and 14 years old and a daughter of 22 years old. My children don’t help me in my work. They will also do this. I will ask them to do this work because they are also uneducated. My husband promoted them to collect
The common aspiration these women had for their children was that they should do anything but sanitation work, though the specifics differed. Many said that the reason they were sticking to sanitation work was to be able to give better lives to their children. Fifty eight percent of the women used the word ‘respected’ when describing the kind of jobs they hoped for their children. The hunger for dignity in their lives was constantly emphasised—that the lack of it in their lives shall hopefully transform into an abundance of it in their children’s lives.

“nahi humne ye kaam karke dekh liya, humare bache ko nahi karne denge” (We have done this work and seen what it is, we will not let our children do the same) – FGD 7

“No, I never want to be that our children grow with this inhuman profession and we focus on their education. We wake up every morning to run only for our children, after all” – FGD 2

“No, there is no future in this profession, it is enough that we are doing” – FGD 1

Despite such hopes and aspirations and their struggles with such an inhuman vocation, a common sense of sadness unites these women who see their children faced with only two options – sanitation work, no matter how educationally qualified, or unemployment. Some respondents did talk about caste discrimination having relatively lessened in jobs, however the rampant underemployment in the residential patches of sanitation workers is difficult to ignore. Most women had multiple mouths to feed and in the case of each, at least one out of 2 children, if not more, were sitting idle and unemployed at home because they are either not educated or do not have the right connections to get recruited in contractual sanitation work.

Socio-Economic Pressures and Types of Discrimination

“I am widow, my husband used to drink excessively. He died ten years ago. I am illiterate, I cannot get other work than this.” – PI 13

Historically, Valmiki communities were pressured into sticking to their professions through tactics of fear, threats of violence and social boycott if they attempted to take up occupations associated with higher castes. Caste divisions dictate matters of marriage, housing, employment and general social interactions. These social divisions reinforce themselves through direct or indirect methods of social ostracism, economic exclusion, physical and emotional violence (Human Rights Watch, 2015).

However, when asked about whether any of the women sanitation workers felt social or economic pressures to continue their work, all of them cited economic pressure as the predominant reason. They admitted that there were subtle social pressures, but the hold of tradition was less in urban areas compared to rural areas. There was a prevalence of a sense of resignation to sanitation work as the only option to escape abject poverty due to their caste.

“Ek din nhi jaye to sochna padta hai, kaha se khayenge” (if we skip work even for a day, we have to think where will we eat from) – FGD 2

“If we get other work than we would leave this profession.” – FGD 4

“nahi chod sakte, chod denge to hamare bacche bhooke nhi mar jayenge. Dusra kam mil jaye to chod sakte hai” (We cannot leave this job, if we do then our children will die hungry. I will leave it if I get other job) – FGD 3

The women workers interviewed gave examples of the indirect pressure they faced that limited their vocational options. At the heart of the caste system lies the denial of the right to free choice of employment for Valmikis (Human Rights Watch, 2015). They are often manipulated to work in “polluted” occupations. Many women pointed out that when members of their own communities try to access public facilities such
as ride in tempos to commute from work, people from the upper caste either shun them away or refuse to travel in the same tempo themselves. Similar experiences of facing comments and of being labelled as ‘kachrawalas’ or ‘garbage people’ also emerged. The reason for such behaviour seems to be their association with ‘dirt’, which influences behaviours, especially when it comes to sharing closed public spaces or using common objects of public use like plates and cups in restaurants and dhabas (roadside eateries).

“People don’t let us drink from the same utensil, and some are good and help. Some says that you be aside we are coming. In today’s time also, we face discrimination. People want to stay away from us. Everybody faces .We want a time should come that people who do discrimination should be on our place and we should be on their place. We feel so bad that why people have made us into this caste.( her voice pitch become worried).If we are not there people would not survive. Many people threaten us to remove us; we say if we go on our will, think what will happen to you all. People should make fun of us, they remove their kids from coming to us, and we feel extremely bad. Caste is all man-made.” – PI 21

When women workers were asked about whether they face direct social discrimination like untouchability from society at large, 19% of those personally interviewed as well as majority of those in group discussions affirmed to facing touch based discrimination in their daily lives. The freedom of movement and residence for Dalit or Valmiki communities is also curtailed through residential segregation (Human Rights Watch, 2015). Our analysis confirmed a spatial discrimination. Areas with a dominant Jain population or those with Jain temples are often more problematic for sanitation workers to manoeuvre. The touch-based discrimination immediately amplifies and expresses itself by limiting their movement only to garbage collection and sweeping dirty roads and nothing beyond that. Regular derogatory comments from the community and a clear spatial hostility ensures their presence only for cleaning purposes and not for resting or socialisation. The women walk away from such localities, meet for tea, and take rest in friendlier neighbourhoods after work.

“They (Jains) walk so rigidly around us as if we will give them some disease! So why stick around there?” – FGD 6

“yeh toh jharu se samaj liya, varna mu pe likha hai kya ki valmik hai??” (It’s because we are holding a broom that they know we are Valmiki, otherwise is it written on our face that we are?) – FGD 6

Nevertheless, it was encouraging to hear that the dominant opinion among most women was that such touch based discriminations did not plague Ajmer as such; a reflection much more hopeful than the results received from other cities such as Jhansi. A significant reason for this is that the neighbourhood they work in have relatively better-educated families and they see these women workers as important parts of their neighbourhood. Especially with the age-old tradition of Rani, the essence of patron client relationships establishes a sense of history that the Valmiki community has been a part of in Ajmer. Age also makes a difference - older women who work as permanent staff under the municipality command respect and are looked upon as motherly figures by other residents. Many of these women sanitation workers have seen the young adults grow up around them and have built bonds of affection and care with their families.
Networks of Garbage

To understand the kind of social structures and institutional networks with respect to garbage and sanitation workers in Ajmer, our women sanitation workers were asked a few inter-related questions. The jajmani system or patron-client relationship has a long history in rural India. In this, the landed higher caste jajmans were the patrons and the service castes were their kameens (servers). Since urban slums inhabited by sanitation workers have rural characteristics, the women workers were asked if such systems still continued. All of them said it did not exist as a solid base to services that it used to be, but it did continue to a certain level through the Rani system. Most women who now work as permanent or contractual workers under AMC may not serve the households in the streets that some of their ancestors may have bought but those relationships are still maintained. Similarly, many contractual women workers under AMC as well as self-employed women still work as Rani to preserve those old relationships to honour their ancestors as well as keep a backup option to earn extra money.

To understand how waste travels and the institutional networks that may exist within, women workers were asked where they collect and clean waste and what they do with it after collection. This was important to understand whether there existed power dynamics in the buying and selling of waste by people from upper castes, as this would impact the collection and the type of waste collected by sanitation workers. Furthermore, this would also give an insight into whether the sanitation workers themselves were using parts of the waste collected by selling them for quick cash, as such practices exist in urban areas. All women said that all they did was to collect waste, put it in their carts, take it to dustbins or dumping grounds certified by the AMC and dump it there. The AMC vehicles then collect all the garbage and take it away to what most women said was Nasirabad, but were not sure all. Sixty two percent women said they also did sort the waste that could be sold for quick cash, bottles and objects made of plastic being the popular choice.

“I deposit (the garbage) to the box and I collect plastic and bottles to get some extra amount and sell them for extra income.” – PI 7
“I collect things like bottles, plastic etc. which earns me a little amount.” – PI 8
“I used collect things like bottles, plastic etc. which I sell and get little amount of 300-400 rupees. which used to manage my extra expenses” – PI 10

The limited knowledge about how waste travels or the structure of a waste pyramid in the city of Ajmer emerged from all interviews. None of the women workers had any idea about where the waste goes beyond the dumping ground or whether any portion of it is sold or treated further. There does not seem to be much information regarding any waste pyramid in the city or any informal systems regulating waste for commercial purposes. Thirty eight percent of the women interviewed, however, did mention the existence of politics in the top of the waste pyramid. Stemming from the popular opinion that there are political affiliations that effect the contract system of sanitation work, i.e., who becomes the certified contractor under AMC and furthermore, who gets employed as contractual workers in the same. The women also mentioned that all the officers and supervisors that are above the lowest rung of the waste pyramid that is sanitation workers, are always from upper castes and never from the Valmiki community.
SOCIAL SECURITY

Unions, Benefits and Life as a Sanitation Worker

A strong workers’ union acts as an important safety net in terms of labour rights protection. None of the women interviewed, however, belonged to any union. In fact they preferred to stay away from them because many of them believed the unions acted as theatres of power play where the interests were not altruistic but favoured a particular section of workers. Furthermore, the established unions are only for permanent workers, not contractual and are a highly gendered domain. Only permanent male sanitation workers and their jamadars regularly meet as unions and women sanitation workers are only called during meetings with important announcements or to gather big crowds when raising demands or showcasing support to the union’s agenda.

Contractual women sanitation workers do not fall anywhere near its ambit and remain unattached for the most part except when summoned to increase a meeting’s crowd. Furthermore, permanent unions are infamous for advancing ‘safe’ requests – most women expressed their dissatisfaction with how entrenched the union leaders were within the agendas of AMC. The real causes and issues of the workers are not debated at all to maintain diplomacy and avoid upsetting officers and supervisors at higher rungs of AMC. The lack of unity among sanitation workers, especially among contractual workers who fear being fired, strengthens the lack of accountability from higher authorities on workers’ issues. Interviews with multiple jamadars who also belong in the unions agreed and confirmed these insights.

“No, everybody is scared of saying things. There is no unity otherwise we would have been in better position.” – PI 5
“Yeh (supervisor) jaisa samjhate hai, hum vaisa bolte hai” (what they (supervisors) tell us, we parrot it) – FGD 7
“People don’t accept that they are doing noble work. These workers don’t realise their own potential. They can force government to provide them good facilities. But they are not united.” – PI Employer 2 (Jamadar)

According to AMC’s Chief Sanitation Officer, permanent sanitation workers receive multiple benefits along with a handsome salary. An interview with him as well as other AMC officers confirmed that those permanent workers recruited before 1st January, 2004, receive Pension Contribution (PC), gratuity as well as Central Provident Fund (CPF) benefits. Those recruited after 1st January, 2004 receive only PC. Women sanitation workers can also avail six months of paid maternity leave. Furthermore, permanent workers receive insurance as well as death claim according to the government norm which mandates that in the event of death during service, the job of the deceased is passed on to his/her family member. Permanent sanitation workers are also entitled to compensations if they meet with any accidents at workplace as well as loans such as house loans according to their salary. They can avail 15 days of casual leaves and 30 days of paid leaves in a year. Thirty days of medical leaves are also available for all permanent workers annually. Permanent workers are also entitled to weekly offs on Sundays and holidays on all national holidays.

An amount of Rs. 350 is included in the salaries of permanent women sanitation workers for them to purchase brooms (Rs. 125), get their uniforms washed (Rs. 150) and buy minor ration products like oil and soap (Rs. 75). Male sanitation workers also receive the same in addition with Rs. 125 to buy masks as they work in drains and sewers. Apart from these benefits included in their salary, women workers also receive Rs. 1950 and male workers receive Rs. 1650 annually to buy uniforms. They
receive payslips along with their salaries regularly and men and women get promotion from sweeper to supervisor. It must be noted, however, that our analysis reflects such promotions to be dominant only among men. All women said that their supervisors are men and that they have never seen a woman supervisor in Ajmer.

While permanent workers are relatively better off despite their difficult profession, the same cannot be said for contractual workers. The contract system under the sanitation industry is known to be exploitative. Taking advantage of the grey areas of outsourcing, the contract system is abused by municipal corporations around the nation, encouraging mistreatment, apathy towards Valmiki workers and the perpetuation of poor working conditions (Yadavar, 2017).

During our interviews, all AMC contractual workers denied receiving any benefits except 3 – 4 leaves a month, which as already discussed above, need not necessarily be Sundays. Those leaves are also dependent on the magnitude of nepotism. With barely Rs. 5500 to run entire households, contractual workers are left severely exploited without any benefits whatsoever. “Nothing, we have no holidays, even we have to go on Sunday. Not getting pension even if we got accident or died, they are not responsible, we have manage ourself if we ask for help then they threaten “ghar jao, dusra aa jayega” (go home, another one will replace you)” – FGD 1

“I don’t get any bonus. If I don’t go he (supervisor) deducts 200 per day. I usually get 3000- 4000 after cutting for leave. I don’t get any holiday. I have to take leave for family, for relatives and children.” – PI 5

“Don’t get any benefits other than salary. In our needs we have to take money high interest rate loan from the landlords. No holidays, insurance, medical facilities. Once we started self help group but it was a failure” – PI 8

“They don’t give any other facilities other than salary. No leave, no medical, no insurance etc. I don’t have any idea about self help group. We don’t have money to make self help group. We have to marry our daughter, for marriage we have to take money on interest. To get good groom we have give dowry. We need around 6-7 lakh rupees for marriage.” – PI 15

“There are no facilities other than fixed salary. They charge us for salary even if we take emergency leave, then cut our salary. They don’t give any maternity leave. Sanitation worker on contract don’t get leave during pregnancy, they have to loose their job. We never heard of self help group. We have to make money on high interest rates.” – PI 16

“I have to go to work on Sundays get full salary otherwise they deduct a portion of it. They don’t give us anything other than hand cart to collect garbage. We have to purchase broom by our own.” – PI 18

“We have to purchase brooms, 3 brooms 100 rupees every month.” – FGD 3

“Contractual worker get around one fourth part of permanent workers salary even though we work more than they do. There are many facilities, like money for uniform, travel allowance, house rent allowance, grains, annual fund, pension” – PI 18

It appears illogical that provisions for benefits are available only for permanent workers, since the kind of sanitation work they do is more or less the same as contractual workers. Those working as contractual employees work under private contractors approved by the government. It is thus important for the municipality to ensure that the private contractors also provide similar benefits and working conditions to their employees. It is cruel to mandate such hostile contracts that do not account for basic rights and entitlements of employees or the double burden of labour undertook by women.
“They have to face lot of problems. They have to take care of their family, kids before they go to work in the morning. Women have more problem than men because they have to do their household chores.” // “There is no concept like maternity leave in their job. They are bound to work by contractor and higher authorities... If they get injured on the workplace than we on our own part provide them primary medical facilities” – PI 2 (Employer, Jamadar)
“I do this to support my family and to get money and for family occasions and occasions of relatives.” – PI 8

To get a better understanding of their situation, we asked all women workers to tell us how they feel as sanitation workers. Seventy seven percent of the women personally interviewed said they feel stuck and destined to do sanitation work and only that. A common refrain in their answers was the feeling of resignation in their situation. Compelled by caste and poverty, these women play the role of invisible citizens – obligated to raise children, to earn money, to cook and clean, to silence. Their entire existence is an obligation to accept a society and a State that does not care.

“They are not giving order. Permanent workers only take salary and do nothing. We do all the work and they get all the money. Its very difficult to adjust. Yes, I would like be become permanent worker as they live their lives happily, their children study in good school and also have a better standard of living.” – PI 21

When a section of a city’s population describes its existence as desperation and exploitation, it confirms that the policy as well as moral compass of its governance is questionable. These women ensure the health of others by compromising theirs, the evidence visible daily with garbage carts pulled out outside our homes every morning to collect our waste. They are mothers, wives, daughters and individuals who have mouths to feed, bills to pay, children to educate and drunken husbands to bear. The condition of sanitation workers and manual scavenging has been an oft-debated one. While it is crucial for the government to revaluate its policies and practices, it is indispensable for society as a whole to do the same in terms of its behaviour and attitudes towards these women.

THROUGH THE GENDER LENS

With so many intersectional identities that women sanitation workers live through every day, their gender identity is a dominant one that moulds their lives the most. Each of the twenty-four hours in their day is spent in balancing the strenuous chores at home, being a caregiver to their families as well as working.
“this work is for bread and butter for my children” – PI 7
“My husband died. But life runs on both wheels. Both husband and wife should work to lead a good life...” – PI 13

It was important to explore certain aspects of their work lives that carry a gendered connotation. It was encouraging to see that 88% of the women said that they did not feel their gender de-capacitates them at their work in any way. No instances of women having faced any form of sexual harassment were recorded; in fact, their
response to these questions always implied their strength in number and their strength in their brooms. They laughed at the possibility of ever being bothered because they were convinced nobody would dare touch them as long as they held their brooms in their hands.

“We are also very advanced. We are like lion, we work and go back nobody has dare to do that. We have chappals (sandals) with us” – PI 7

“No, if somebody harasses us then first of all we will hit him, our broom is in our hands, it is our weapon” - FGD 1

“Never faced anything like that. Nobody comes to us because we have brooms in our hands” – PI 5

When asked if the women workers felt easily replaceable or that women were easily fired compared to men, most women responded negatively. They confirmed that men and women were treated equally and it did not matter what their gender was; if their work was incompetent, they would have to face the consequences.

Supervisors or havaldars watching over their work were mostly men. Despite the Chief Sanitation Inspector’s claim of regular promotions from sweeper to supervisor for men and women, all women interviewed confirmed they had never seen a woman as a supervisor in Ajmer. Furthermore, unlike the grievance redressal mechanism available to the general public in Ajmer, the women sanitation workers had no official way to file complaints or work-related grievances except informal methods like personally mentioning it to their supervisors.

“Every month my supervisor take bribe of 200 rupees, when he pays our salary. We are group of 15-16 worker, he takes 200 bribe from each and every one in every month when he pays us. His name is B*** b***. He is from our caste, but he cruel.” – PI 20

Many contractual workers mentioned the practice of bribery by their supervisors, and the payment of salary via cash instead of bank transfers enable this practice. A stronger enabler of exploitation is the absence of a formal complaint system which disables any form of accountability regarding corrective actions taken or not taken. This makes it easier to dismiss the problems of women sanitation workers and amplifies the power dynamics of the contractual structure they belong to the lowest rungs of.

“There is no proper mechanism for that, but we can complaint to inspector, but nobody pays attention to our complaints” – FGD 4

Enabling a health-friendly working environment for women, especially because of their biological cycles such as pregnancies and menstruation, has been recognised by legislative functions for women labourers. For example, The Second National Commission on Labour, 2002 justified protective discriminatory legislation in favour of women workers, acknowledging the difficulties experienced by them (Shodh Ganga, n.d). However, while all women responded negatively when asked if their gender de-capacitates them at work, a different picture emerged when they were asked about situations like coping with menstrual cycles at work. All women explained that they force themselves to deal with the pain and go to work, as taking leave would mean a straight deduction of Rs. 200 from their salaries. In very severe cases of pain, women try to dull the pain with medicines and go to work. Holidays are taken only if they feel completely immobile.

“I have to go otherwise they will deduct salary. If I take a leave than how shall I feed my children? ” – PI 15

“I have to go otherwise, what shall I eat? In any condition, I have to work. We get only Sunday, for that also they deduct salary” – PI 16

“I never take any leave. If it is serious than I take medicines and go to the work.” – PI 1

“I have to go otherwise they will deduct salary. In extreme situation I take medicine.” – PI 13
“It’s too difficult. We face many times but we have to cope up because it is our job. We cannot give this reason for not performing” – PI 23
All women expressed the difficulties of working with menstrual stomach cramps, lethargy, thigh rashes caused due to sanitary napkins or cloth, urinary infections, weakness and dizziness. Some women also admitted to having to take their children along for help on days they felt too weak to work. Despite voicing these issues, they emphasised that they learned to bear the pain and manage their work as there is no other option.

What was interesting to note was that many women said that they had never thought about menstruation as a hindrance before. While their responses clarified the kind of problems they have to deal with eventually through the interviews, most women had accepted it as a part of their lives and something they were supposed to cope with quietly. It was not a point of contention or discussion, but a fact of acceptance by being a woman.

“I am use to it. We are not careful to look after these things” – PI 22

Through multiple focus group discussions, the prioritisation of the self was perpetually put secondary to their caste, their work and their families. The labour of love as a true phenomenon surfaces from each recorded interview, but the sheer negligence of their own pain to avoid showing signs of weakness was proof to how societal attitudes towards them had been internalised in their minds.

OCCUPATIONAL HEALTH

Challenges to Own Health

“We are on our own. No one is responsible for our safety. My life is nothing more than a garbage. It starts in it and ends in it.” – PI 20

Apart from the diversity in culture, history, religion and language, India is also known for its diversity of living and working conditions (Jaitly and Vijay, n.d). These working conditions range from highly regulated to Dickensian-like appallingly neglected conditions, based on the sector of work. The problem of occupational health and safety is fatal and sanitation workers pay the price by bearing all kinds of diseases.

To explore this in our study, women workers were asked about issues of occupational health. When asked about the kind of challenges faced in their own hygiene, all women mentioned varied problems from infections from cuts caused by rusted nail and glass, eye and throat infections caused by dust to seasonal infections specially during monsoons, skin scrapes and allergies and bruises. The women also mentioned the challenges in managing menstrual cycles during work, especially during rain. The confluence of drenched clothes during menstruation while handling wet waste was disconcerting to hear as a regular and seasonal experience.

All but one woman among contractual workers said they received no safety gears or uniforms. It is crucial for those working as contractual workers receive safety gears like uniforms, masks, gloves and protective shoes for the kind of work they do from their private contractors. The contrast to the safety provisions for permanent workers under AMC and the contractual workers is appalling. Considering the type of work and the high risk faced in their vocations, protective kits and gears are indispensable to avoid injuries and infections. The constant interaction with garbage inclusive of human and animal waste, broken glass, iron nails, wood spokes and other wet and dry waste without gloves and protective gears can be fatal.

“Nahi kuch nahi dete hamare ko, hum khud hee kapda late hai muh dhakane ke liye” // “Gloves, mask kuch nhi dete hai” (They do not give us anything, we bring our own
cloth as masks to cover our mouths and noses. Gloves, mask, they give us nothing) – FGD 3

“They do not provide any kind of training on how to do the work, we learn by watching and asking seniors” – FGD 1

“There is a provision to give us mask, but they don’t give us” – FGD 3

“They don’t give us anything to protect to ourselves from extreme weather situations” – FGD 4

“We are living on god’s grace. Water and shelter is not available during the extreme weather conditions. I usually fall sick and have to take leave for half day during extreme weather conditions. They never give any kit or any facilities. They never told us anything about our safety. We have our own safety measure to protect ourselves. They don’t give us any training. There are no safety measures for us. If anything happens at the workplace, then our supervisor pays our primary medical expenses. Once I met 2 accidents while I was cleaning street sewage at my work place my hand was broken, then I had to take treatment from a private hospital.” – PI 6

“There are no facilities and protective measures for us on workplace. We have to purchase brooms. I purchase 2 brooms of 80 rupees each every month, and two other instrument of 20 and 20 rupees per month. They don’t give us any insurance and medical facilities. There is no arrangement of first aid kit on our workplace. At the workplace we have to take protective measures of ourselves. They deduct salary for medical leave.” – PI 12

The women were asked how they handle human waste like baby waste as well as menstrual waste. Eighty-five percent said that such waste was disposed off properly by households and they were either dropped directly into the carts by house owners or picked up with the brooms and other instruments like tongs by the women sanitation workers. It is, however, a matter of concern that 15% of the women said that they did not even have these basic equipment and handled human and animal waste by hand, indicating the persistence of manual scavenging.

“Through bare hands we collect all shit.” // “We have no other means to earn our livelihood and thus we end up in this job.” – PI 20

“We do it through bare hands. We do it from sewerage also. If animal dies, we put it through hands and keep it” – PI 21

“Usually they throw it with proper packing. We collect it with our hands. What shall I do, my work is like this only.” – PI 8

Facilitation of a Safe Working Environment by Employers

“On the basis of these Directive Principles as well as international instruments, Government is committed to regulate all economic activities for management of safety and health risks at workplaces and to provide measures so as to ensure safe and healthy working conditions for every working man and woman in the nation.” – Ministry of Labour and Employment, Government of India website

Ninety-six percent of the women sanitation workers said that the government and their private employers were not facilitating a healthy and safe work environment. Basic provisions like first aid kits were not available. Minor accidents on the road are common but no safety provisions or patrols of any kind are organised. They do not raise their voices against it because they feel powerless and replaceable.

“There are no facilities and amenities. They don’t give us any training. We work like animals. No, there are no measure, and kit. Even we die, who cares for us. They never treat us as human beings.” – PI 16

“We don’t feel safe, if accidents happen then we have to pay for the medical treatment” – FGD 5
It was encouraging to hear many women admit that while the government or their employing agencies did not try to make their work places safe, the communities where they worked did. Despite it not being a dominant practice, many women did share stories of small helpful gestures made by the community on instances of accidents or other mishaps. Furthermore, many contractual women workers vociferously supported many of their jamadars and said that despite poor working conditions imposed in a top down approach, the jamadars did their best to make their lives as easy as they could. Multiple instances where jamadars paid for initial medical expenses out of their own personal pockets for injured women workers were recounted. They were also praised for their benevolence when it came down to adjusting holidays in a way that the least amount of money was deducted in the case extra holidays taken due to emergencies.

Physical and Mental Health

Women sanitation workers were asked about their physical and mental health along with their dependency on any drugs or substances. Fifty-eight percent women had some kind of physical problem. Over group and personal discussions, the dominant types of physical problems were confirmed to be skin rashes, high blood pressure, swollen fingers, allergies, permanently broken nails, regular fever, constant weakness, diabetes, cough and breathing problems, hair loss - some of which were the result of their jobs. Seasonal issues of extreme weather conditions like rain and loo came through as significant sources of physical weakness as well as infections. Especially during rain, the water seeps through the garbage carts women carry and fill up to the brim and spill on their feet and hands. These cause a variety of infections and diseases. The lack of protective gears and traditional carts enable the perpetuation and spread of such illnesses which could be life threatening. Dehydration due to working in the scorching heat causes fainting episodes, fever and weakness. While the women workers did acknowledge these physical issues, they did not express them as matters of concern but as an accepted every fact. Their resignation to the kinds of problems in their occupational health reiterated on their real priority, to keep a source of income as many of them said “starvation will kill us sooner than allergies”.

“Road pe mar bhi gayi toh who puchenge nahi ki tu mar rahi hai ya jee rahi hai”
(If we are dying on the road, they (employers) will not ask if I am dying or alive)
– FGD 1

“sham tak jeev lakhara jata ha, sabji roti banana bhi muskil ho jata hai.. sham ko to
esi halat ho jati hai, koi gadi lekar aa jaye , or me usme baith ke chaali jau”
(By evening, the life in me trembles. It becomes too difficult to even make food. By evening, my physical state is so bad that I just wish a car could come and I could sit in it and go away)
– FGD 3

“Even if we die nobody will pay attention to it.”
“I have to face these things but it is my work. In summers, my head feel like it will burst and I feel like I will fall down. In rain, we have to handle waste of animals, sometimes we fall while taking the cart. In winter we use fire by collecting waste to warm ourselves. They (private contractors) never provided anything like kits, and safe work environment. Even for broom we have to look into our own pockets. A broom last for 15 days.”
– PI 21

“In winters, we have to come early and expose ourselves to such harsh reality called life. If we get hurt, we have to look on our own selves.”
– PI 23

The issue of mental health in India still falls into conservative approaches of discussion. Therefore, it was not surprising when the women sanitation workers were
asked about their mental health and the immediate responses were a series of denial. All women responded negatively when asked if they felt their employers showed any accountability towards their physical and mental health. To dig deeper, the questions in our questionnaire were designed with non-leading probes which helped to bring out their state of mind through anecdotes and examples. When asked if they faced anxiety, severe sadness (depression), mood swings or tensions of any kind, they nodded and said that they faced constant anxiety and depression but did not understand how that was relevant. The concept that continuously feeling these emotions could lead to clinical depression, anxiety attacks, hypertension, bipolarity, etc was not something that they acknowledged. These were everyday emotions which were seen as life as it is.

“Yes, it happens sometimes, but what shall I do. I have to do this work. I have do die again for this work. I feel angry. But I have to clean. In my depression I talk to friends and family and feel relax… Nobody takes our responsibility. If we die here nobody will take our body to our home” – PI 14

Apart from the feeling of being ‘stuck’ or ‘resigned’, an overwhelming number of women expressed the anxiety that comes with feeling replaceable under the contract system. Unlike the system for permanent staff, the contractual system makes it very easy to fire and recruit people. The presence of nepotism in the contractual system amplifies this further and constantly keeps women from challenging issues of workplace or working conditions in the fear that they will be fired and immediately replaced by a pool of unemployed members of the Valmiki community. Most women admitted to facing threats of being sacked by their supervisors under the smallest of mistakes and questions. This deeply affects their mental health and causes stress, anxiety and depression.

“Hum chod denge toh dusre lag jayenge. Upar walo ki hee chalti hai, jara sabhi kuch bolo to, dhamaki deta hai ki aur mat aa. Har baat pe dhamki” (If we leave this job then someone else will take it. The upper class rules over us, if we say anything at all, they threaten to sack us. They threaten us for everthing) – FGD 3

“No, nobody is ready to listen to us. There is no mechanism. They threaten us to throw us out of this job.” – PI 16

“If somebody speaks, then she is threatened to lose her job. They sack people easily out of job without any prior notice to them.” – FGD 4

“They scold us if we commit mistakes. They threaten us to throw out from the job” – FGD 5

“They are at a benefit as they are permanent and don’t have any job insecurity, we are faced with daily trauma if we don’t work properly. We work in garbage most of the times so we will very low at times about our lives and our future. We see nothing changing in future and nothing will change.I feel very low at times, my heart feels low, I don’t feel like not going to work” – PI 24

“No, it’s all on us. I feel very lethargic sick and gloomy at times. I feel like my life has no meaning.” – PI 23

Sixty-two percent of all women personally interviewed and 92% of all women respondents in group discussions admitted to being addicted to gutka (tobacco mix) and tobacco which cause cancer and weaken teeth and gums. They said it was the only way to beat the smell of garbage when they work and the habit is impossible to give up. They also explained rampant alcoholism amongst their husbands and male sanitation workers, who can only enter sewers and septic tanks filled with shit when they are not sober.

“Gandangi ki wajah se khate hai, badbu nhi aati” – FGD 3
"I chew guthaka as my work is dirty. If the mouth is closed with gutka, we think that dirt will not go in. My children tell me to leave gutka as they think that their father has died so I am the only one for them" – PI 22

"I take gutka as once we don't eat this, we will like vomiting. It's a problem for us. Already doctor has told me that I have two-three diseases but I never go for check up as money will be spent. I want to earn day and night and earn for my kids" (She said, crying) – PI 21

LAWS, SCHEMES AND POLICIES

There are many national level policies, schemes and laws to protecting Dalit communities from social and occupational atrocities. One of these is the Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Employment (PEMSR) Act 2013 by the Ministry of Social Justice and Empowerment (MoSJE), which decreed a ban on manual scavenging. The PEMSR Act stems from The Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) (EMSCDL) Act, 1993. The Protection of Civil Rights Act, 1955 was the first law to have initiated the process of conversion of dry latrines to pour-flush latrines to discourage manual handling of human waste. This act was followed by an array of policies and schemes like the Integrated Low Cost Sanitation (1980), Total Sanitation Campaign (1999), National River Conservation Programme (1995), National Urban Sanitation Policy (2008), and Jawaharlal Nehru Urban Renewal Mission (2005). These schemes echoed the ideas of Gandhi, condemned manual scavenging and encouraged the protection, sensitisation and rehabilitation of communities linked to sanitation work.

While the permanent sanitation workers under AMC have some kind of protection based on policy defining types of work, the same cannot be said for the contractual workers who have no sources of information about protective laws for them. Not one of the contractual women sanitation workers participating in our study had any awareness about these laws, policies or schemes that were meant to protect them and their rights. While they vaguely knew that manual scavenging was not ‘appreciated’ anymore, that was the extent of their awareness and did not know of the specificities of the law or the consequences of its violation. When asked if their local leaders, councillors or other JMC officials ever tried to explain to them or educate them about such laws or about their entitlements, they said that all local officials only treated their settlements as potential vote banks and only interacted with them during elections. Beyond these interactions, local officials and leaders have taken no initiatives whatsoever to raise awareness regarding the rights of women sanitation workers or discuss their responsibilities. There is a discernible gap between local communities of sanitation workers and their elected representatives.

“They (local officers) never educate and tell us about our rights. They never met us. // “No. We know our broom, we know the contractor and nobody else” – PI 22

“No, they come only in election time for vote and that time everybody comes” – FGD 1

“No. They never have done anything for to educate us” – PI 15

“Koi yojna nhi hai, langde ho jao to sadte raho, paisa ho to lagao, nhi to maro” (There is no program/policy/scheme for us. If you can’t walk then rot, if you have money then put it all in, or else die)

It was interesting to note that despite the role of local leaders and officials in ameliorating the awareness and life conditions of sanitation workers is questionable, 81% of the women personally interviewed women responded negatively when asked if they thought local officials perpetuated caste-based vocations through AMC’s hiring process. It was interesting because their denial was based on the understanding that hiring related to any sanitation work was ‘naturally’ meant for the Valmiki communities, and not anybody else. They also said that the Valmiki community
remains in its caste-based vocation because no other jobs are given to them, no matter how much or little educated.
“Kaam yahi hai humara… hum toh yeh hi karte aa rahe hai” (This is our work and we have been doing this work forever) – FGD 6
“The government changes. People fill pockets but we are on our own.” – PI 23

The continued ‘natural’ acceptance of vocational association with caste in this day and age is a matter of concern. Such associations reflect unfair and dated systems of power dynamics as present ruling structure. To not recognize negative discrimination because of accepting one’s identity as inferior based on the natural order of things is an act of violence against a whole section of population for reasons without any merit. Discrimination based on facts of one’s identity that are not achieved but are born in to represent a sick society that is yet to achieve full emotional and mental intelligence and lacks sympathy.

CONCLUSION

“baccho ke liye maa kuch bhi kar sakti hai… baccho ke liye (yeh kaam) karna padta hai” (A mother can do anything for her children… I have to do this work for my children) – FGD 3
“They usually throw (garbage) openly. We have to collect it from our broom. Everybody wants cleanliness, but nobody takes responsibility. It makes me uneasy, because these are infectious.” // “We have to go to work. While people sleep, we clean Ajmer city. We have to work in extreme weather conditions. Our supervisor scolds us if we take rest during our work hour or during scorching heat, frozen cold. There is no proper arrangement of water in summer” – PI 16
“People in the morning chant god name, while we clean dirty garbage. What shall I do? I have to accept it” – PI 17
“I want to work day and night for my children. I want to work extra for my children. As my husband is not there, I have to take up this job to work for my kids. My heart aches to see the permanent worker, they come home early. My kids feel that we wish my mother also gets good salary” – PI 21

These are the voices of the invisible, the narratives of the forgotten, and the realities of our worst nightmares. While the entire country parades to Swachh Bharat, the people who make India clean have become nothing but (manual) cleaning tools. These voices are the conclusion of a Swachh Bharat, a Bharat that accepts the denial of education, rights and dignity of the powerless.

The predispositions considered at the very beginning of this report confirmed their unhealthy and expected co-dependency in the lives of women sanitation workers, ‘preserving’ an intergenerational tragedy.

As exhibited through our findings, the intersection of gender and caste in the lives of women sanitation workers suggests that those disadvantaged in both - namely, low caste women - bear the worst brunt of discrimination (Deshpande, 2007). The specific problem of caste oppression suffered by the Valmiki community has constantly been interspersed by a generalised patriarchal exploitation. For them, caste, class and gender intersect to relegate them to the margins of India’s political economy (Malik, 1999). While access to school and education is minimal for the Valmiki community in general the women, bear a disproportionately higher share of this burden due to their predisposed roles revolving around housework and sanitation. Valmiki women face discrimination in access to a dignified life, legal redress, fair wages, decision-making processes and to benefits from - or even the
knowledge of - government-initiated programmes targeted at their welfare. Health and childcare related issues are relegated to the background as they cope with daily struggles. Their marginalisation intensifies through the practice of untouchability and unequal social relations are amplified by the inequitable access to resources. The inequity constantly reproduces itself when Valmiki women are forced to perform menial tasks, in exchange for permission, for example, to draw water from a public source (Malik, 1999). Their association with sanitation work, which is seen as the lowest of lowest jobs, enable such situations.

Despite the improvement of Rajasthan’s sex ratio from 921 to 926 (Census, 2011) over the last decade, it still remains lower than the national average of 940. The state remains at the bottom of the table among empowered action group (EAG) states where child sex ratio is concerned (Mathur and Rajagopal, 2011). The trend of eliminating girls has present day consequences and feeds into the lower caste communities in harsher ways than those in the upper castes. This is especially harsh in terms of access to education.

The lack of education is a crucial factor maintaining this imbalanced power dynamics. The access to education based on caste complicates an already prevalent gender gap in the country. The gender gap in education increases as the age of a child increases. An intra-household gender discrimination prevails in the informal urban settlements of Ajmer, with a bias against female children in the intra-household distribution of health care and education (Kingdon, 2002). This is especially true for the older generation of working mothers, as portrayed by our analysis. A tendency of ‘perfect capitalist’ parental behaviour plagues the socio-economically backward communities of India wherein parents invest in the child that promises maximum returns. This practice stems from patriarchal norms that establish girls as the ‘property of another home’ beyond a certain age while boys are seen as the natural heirs of a household (Glick and Sahn, 2000). While this tendency is relatively less now and many women workers insist they want to educate their children, the focus group discussions as well as personal interviews revealed that daughters had a more stunted access to education or outdoor skills than their male siblings. Women sanitation workers still raise their daughters to marry early and, in most cases, take up sanitation work along with handling housework – just the way they themselves were raised. This is not just due to intentioned bias, but due to the family’s affordability power and the taint of tradition.

Valmiki households and communities that earn low levels of income in general are more dominated by capitalistic attitudes than those that earn high levels of income. When the affordability of a family is limited to educating one child instead of two, boys receive preference due to ‘better returns’. The gender bias reduces, if not disappears when families can afford to educate all their children – and the experience of education, specially good quality education, diminishes the hold of socially orthodox beliefs that pit one gender against the other. Most of the women (and their children) in our study, however, only experienced a compromised education due to generations of poverty, alienation and little exposure.

The politics of geographical disparity with respect to education comes through in every interview recorded during our study. The predominance of gender gap in literacy in the BIMARU states (Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh) is evident from their history of son preference. In the case of our study, the historical negligence of schooling and literacy in Rajasthan for Valmiki communities and specifically the women in them surfaced repeatedly. Studies launched well into the 2000s comparing the human development and inclusiveness of women in
development in different districts of India had the most number of districts (Barmer, Jaisalmer, Jalaur, and Jodhpur) which were most worse off belonging to Rajasthan (Rustagi, 2000). The gender bias in the attainment of literacy levels is highest in Rajasthan, and Uttar Pradesh, followed by Madhya Pradesh and Haryana (ibid).

The practice of early marriage coupled with a historic oppression for the Valmiki community ensured that women sanitation workers in Ajmer lived through the worst corners of the alienated square of gender, caste, geography and education. The enforcing of cultural codes of traditions in North India, specifically in Bihar, Rajasthan and Uttar Pradesh, leads to domestic violence against women (Chowdhry, 1997). According to the NSS Report No. 532: Education in India, on the enrolment status of people aged between 5-29 years in states and union territories in rural areas, 55.4% girls in Rajasthan are not even enrolled anywhere compared to 39.6% among boys. The situation slightly improves in urban areas where the percentage of enrolled girls falls to 42.2% and 34.1% for boys (Ghose, 2011).

The expenditure on education stems from two sources: (1) institutional or the contribution of the state and (2) private, which consists of expenditure made by households themselves (Chaudhuri and Roy, 2006). The two sources must complement each other to ensure quality education for all. However, multiple studies (Chaudhuri and Roy, 2006; Ghose, 2011; Mehrotra, 2006) on Rajasthan confirm the exclusion of the Valmiki communities and religious minorities from well-endowed educational institutions. They are either relegated to poorly staffed government schools with very little infrastructure or not enrolled in schools at all.

Further, the role of education of parents came through as a dominant influencer of generational education. The education of parents, specifically mothers, show favourable impact on the educational expenditure in all states (Chaudhuri and Roy, 2006). However, Rajasthan, which already has an anti-female bias in education, discourages Valmiki women from gaining the kind of agency required to break free. The communities of sanitation workers are witnesses to decades and generations of illiterates, and ironically, education is the only exit from such a life. When your way out of misery becomes your entry into it in the first place, where does one go?

“No. Nobody takes our responsibility. If we die here nobody will take our body to our home.” – PI 14

The four predispositions of gender, caste, geography and education have the cumulative effect of trapping Valmiki women into an life of sanitation work, keeping their children floating in both the hope of a better life as well as the hope of passing on their jobs to them. Our study and field experiences reveal that the work of sanitation (in various degrees and forms) still belongs to one particular caste – the Valmiki community. Despite well-intentioned policies, schemes and campaigns, the dominance of the upper and middle castes persists and there is very little accountability from the state to address the problem. Especially with a capitalist economy that focusses on optimal utilisation through the least amount of investment in employee benefits or occupational health, the contract system has emerged as another layer of exploitation.

Furthermore, governmental, cultural and economic differences are not the only aspects of caste differences. Caste inequality, as rightly argued by Ambedkar, is graded inequality where discrimination exists at multiple levels of social groupings (Jodhka and Shah, 2010). There are internal divisions and inequalities within the Valmiki communities. The existence of a sense of loyalty to communal suffering makes it difficult for outliers to survive. Such differences make it impossible to organise these communities and result in institutionalising discrimination.
Discrimination, itself, becomes a cultural trait in these social groups. Our study, therefore, shows that alterations to the present system, while required immediately, cannot pursue a standardised strategy but have to take multiple contexts into consideration for sustained change.

What can be concluded is that while gender and caste are irreplaceable predispositions of a woman sanitation worker’s life, it is education, or the lack of it, that becomes the primary weapon to maintain the efficient and inhuman caste hierarchy. Consumed in a vicious cycle, the intergenerational lack of access to education, influenced by geopolitics and traditional practices, restrict empowerment and the capacity of these communities to move towards better-paid and dignified occupations.

The ease with which these women workers are relegated to invisibility enables and even encourages the lack of accountability on the part of the government to provide safe workplaces or generate awareness about their rights and entitlements. The lack of direct policies that ensure that contracts are not exploitative but are empowering act as enablers of limited accountability. Such ignorance influences, and is influenced by, the rest of the society which refuses to normalise them as a part of the wider community. Using caste as the basis of our country’s politics, a two-way relationship is manifested between State and society, where ignorance at both ends perpetuates the conditions of women sanitation workers lives.

Just like in villages, the source of discrimination is still embedded in culture; but is enforced by economic pressures in the case of urban areas. The lack of basic employment entitlements like payslips, equal wages for similar sanitation work and other benefits reflect a severe gap between the realities of our women sanitation workers and their local governance. The perpetuation of purity-pollution based discrimination remains an accepted phenomenon with multiple facets. These facets sometimes surface as the lack of vocational options for Valmiki children, residential segregation, cleaning human excreta with bare hands, unpaid leaves, working through pregnancies and menstruation cycles, wife-beating alcoholic husbands, skin diseases and infections, depression unacknowledged as a problem but as a perpetual and the only state of being they know.

This conclusion does not aim to reproduce the theories and findings already discussed – it aims to conclude the realities that sound so inhuman when written about but not inhuman enough for communal self-reflection or change yet. This conclusion aims to remind society and State the inhumanity imposed upon a section of people no different from us, except their surnames. This conclusion is a reminder of all that we as a society have failed to accept, if not realise.
WAY FORWARD

Recommendations for governmental institutions

1. A comprehensive policy aimed directly at the protection of sanitation workers must be made and implemented which would cover entitlements, rehabilitation as well as specific directives of occupational health for permanent as well as contractual/private sanitation workers.

2. The waste management plan of each urban/semi-urban body must be inclusive of all sanitation workers engaged in the collection, transportation, and conversion of waste into other products. It is important that policies not only suggest but also ensure safe and hygienic handling of waste, and that municipalities regularly dispense good quality safety gear to all workers, whether or not there is demand for them from the workers. It is vital to involve the community at large to ensure that regulators provide such gear to the people involved in all kinds of sanitation work.

3. The dignity associated with ‘salary’ must be conferred on all workers. A logical and fair wage chart must be drawn up, keeping in mind that the work done by all kinds of sanitation workers (permanent and contractual) is similar and large wage gaps between them is unacceptable. It must also be remembered that the contractual workers are the most vulnerable, since they receive no benefits whatsoever despite working equal, if not longer, hours.

4. The issue of lack of payslips and wage books to contractual workers must be addressed immediately for all categories of sanitation workers and a system of surprise checks for the dealing clerks must be set.

5. Medical insurance or partial support must be initiated as a policy, keeping in mind the constant danger from physical injuries/problems.

6. Sanitation workers and waste pickers integrated in the door-to-door collection schemes of contracted out models must receive government-mandated benefits like paid holidays, schemes such as CPF/Society Fund / maternity leaves/ payslips to improve their earnings and working conditions, their earnings and transform their status from that of waste pickers to service providers.
7. Fair and independent workers unions should be established to promote ‘substantive rights’ – wages, hours of work, working conditions, and minimise income inequalities between the different categories of sanitation workers.

8. Local councillors (parshads) and leaders must organise regular information dissemination and awareness generation sessions about the rights and entitlements of sanitation workers. Such meetings should reflect upon the review of local councillors and their competency, failing which their role should come under scrutiny by the local governments.

9. The persistence of manual scavenging must be acknowledged by local bodies, followed by thorough inspection of its incidence and steps must be taken to end the practice and rehabilitate those earning their livelihoods through it.

10. Women sanitation workers need to be integrated into programmes such as Skill India and National Skill Development Mission to enable them to shift towards better paying and dignified jobs. This must happen simultaneously with mechanising the cleaning of drainage and sewerage systems. However, this must be done gradually so that the sanitation workers are not displaced from their jobs abruptly before they are integrated into alternative vocations.

11. Special facilities (first aid kits, drinking water and toilets) and policies like menstrual leaves must be considered to promote mental wellbeing of women workers. Established mandates such as maternity leaves, paid leaves and medical leaves must be checked regularly and employers who fail to provide these should be deemed directly responsible and face strict action.

12. Day care centres/ crèches for babies of working mothers should be established to soften women’s double burden of labour and promote a healthier and relaxed work environment.

13. Women sanitation workers from all three categories of sanitation workers should have reduced hours of work, instead of double shifts, to help them balance home and work life.
14. There should be a policy to provide financial support for quality education till higher secondary as well as skill building programmes and technical training for the children of sanitation workers. Along with this, adult literacy programmes should also be organised for sanitation workers and enable them to look at other vocational options along with their children.

15. The implementation schemes meant to protect sanitation workers should be evaluated by independent bodies of sanitation workers from the Valmiki community and local bodies should be held accountable for any failures. These bodies of sanitation workers should tie up with civil society organisations for support to form an independent alliance keeping a watch on the implementation of good intentioned policies.

16. Internal Complaints Committees and Local Complaints Committees must be set up to address issues of sexual and other forms of harassment among women sanitation workers. It is also necessary to secure a mechanism that facilitates the independent and unbiased functioning of such committees.

17. Aggressive national level campaigns aimed towards changing attitudes and belief systems against caste should be launched through the media, exhibitions, rath yatras, theatre, poetry and other mediums of communication.

Recommendations for social institutions

18. The community at large must first accept its role in the inhuman treatment of sanitation workers and motivate itself to learn about their life experiences. This would help in humanising them and inspire sympathy and the will to change.

19. In order to do this, it is important to organise panel discussions in schools, universities, neighbourhoods, with women sanitation workers as panelist. Hearing their stories in their own voice and the association of a real face with them instead of third party representative narratives such as this report will be much more powerful, relatable and humanised and will resonate better with listeners.

20. Schools, colleges and universities must be engaged to harness the youth to spread of ideas of transformation. Designing educational
syllabuses awarding credits to those who create and participate in programmes that open up dialogue about the role of their households in bettering the lives of sanitation workers could act as incentives to start such a movement. Youth should be motivated to work or intern with civil society organisations working with, and on the issues of, sanitation workers. This would imbibe in them a sense of empathy and understanding at an early age – one of the most significant values required for real change at the social level.

21. The government and ordinary people should encourage alternative businesses started by people from the Valmiki community by buying from them and spreading the word about such shops/businesses.

22. Local neighbourhood bodies such as Residential Welfare Associations (RWAs) should pledge to adopt methods of waste disposal that would make the lives of sanitation workers dignified - the proper covering and disposal of sanitary waste, e-waste and hazardous waste to ensure the least possible scope of physical or emotional hardship while tackling waste by workers. Societies could organise environmentally-friendly systems of disposal in partnership with the sanitation workers in their respective areas.

23. Everyday influencers such as celebrities from the media and film/advertisement world should advocate the normalisation of Valmiki communities. Partnerships with production houses – regional, national and international – for making films and documentaries using the real faces and voices of sanitation workers to highlight their plight would go a long way in spreading the message.
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This document is published under the Engaged Citizens, Responsive City (ECRC) project being implemented by PRIA, supported by the European Union. The project focuses on strengthening civil society of the urban poor to participate in planning and monitoring of sanitation services across three cities in India – Ajmer (Rajasthan), Jhansi (Uttar Pradesh) and Muzaffarpur (Bihar).

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