

SHAME & STIGMA IN SANITATION

**Competing Faiths and Compromised
Dignity, Safety and Employment Security
of Sanitation Workers in Pakistan**

An Initial Assessment with
Recommendations by
Asif Aqeel
Mary Gill

Shame and Stigma in Sanitation

Competing Faiths, and Compromised Dignity, Safety and
Employment Security of Sanitation Workers in Pakistan

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| Principal Author: | Asif Aqeel |
| Second Author: | Mary Gill |
| Oversight Research Development: | Raheem-ul-Haque |
| Editing: | Julia Bicknell and Asher John |
| Research Assistant: | Basil Dogra |
| Surveyors: | Asher Ayrán, Basil Dogra, Sunil Gulzar and Haroon Masih |
| Citation & Formatting: | Basil Dogra |
| Cover Photo: | Abdul Islam Rathore |
| Back Cover: | Dureajam Wasif |
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Being a Christian in Pakistan may be breathtaking in quite a different sense: it may mean cleaning up other people's urine and bowel movements for the rest of one's life ...

God's Foreign Policy: Practical Ways to Help the World's Poor (1984) By American anthropologist and missionary Professor Miriam Adeney

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ABBREVIATIONS

CPPG - Centre for Public Policy and Governance

EOBI - Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution

FCCU-Forman Christian College University

ILO - International Labor Organization

LDA - Lahore Development Authority

LESCO - Lahore Electricity Supply Company

LIT - Lahore Improvement Trust

LMC - Lahore Municipal Corporation

LWMC - Lahore Waste Management Company

MACP - Minority Advisory Council of Punjab

MCL - Metropolitan Corporation of Lahore

OSH - Occupational Safety and Health

PPE - Personal Protection Equipment

SDO - Sub-Divisional Officer

SDGs - Sustainable Development Goals

SOPs - Standard Operating Protocols

UDHR - Universal Declaration of Human Rights

UNICEF - United Nations Children's Fund

WASH - Water Sanitation and Hygiene

WASA - Water and Sanitation Agency, Lahore

WHO - World Health Organization

ACKNOWLEDGMENT



Stephen T. Franklin

Professor Emeritus and
Former President,
Tokyo Christian University

image courtesy
(<https://www.cccu.org>)

Professor of Philosophy Dr. Stephen T. Franklin's brief explanation of the so-called 'untouchables' in the Indian society opened a whole new area of learning in 2004, when I was a student at Tokyo Christian University, Japan. The condition of untouchable, now known as Dalits, in India and that of Pakistani Christians seemed strikingly similar. During my M.Sc. in Sociology at Allama Iqbal Open University, Pakistan, the focus remained on Pakistani Christians.

In 2008, I organized a program titled ***“Why Christians are called Chuhra”*** and shared my understanding on name-calling of Christians as “Chuhra” which can be translated as “sweepers”. Back then, no one was willing to discuss this pejorative term associated with Pakistani Punjabi Christians even in private. It was thought that Muslims use this term of abuse to express hatred towards Christians. The program, however, laid the foundation for looking at the term from the Indian caste perspective. Former Forman Christian College (FCCU) Vice-Rector Cusrow J. Dubash, then US Consulate Political and Economic Affairs Officer Antone C. Greubel, and During the program, Father Abid Habib were the guests of honor at the program. Father Habib, after the program, introduced me to the seminal work done by Irish Catholic priest John O'Brien on Pakistani Punjabi Christians.

From 2007 onwards, Compass Direct, now WorldWatchMonitor.org (WWM), a news agency dedicated to reporting the persecuted church, engaged me to cover challenges faced by the Pakistani Christians. Journalistic interaction and providing legal and humanitarian assistance to Christians exposed me to the practical side of my academic work.

Here, I would like to thank Napoleon Qayyum, Khalid Shahzad, Boota Imtiaz, Hanook Gill, Younus Iqbal, William Sadiq, Ivon Gill and several other Christians who contributed to understanding the situation on the ground while I was covering it for the WWM. In 2013, WWM Executive Director Julia Bicknell and I developed a long piece on the caste aspect of Pakistani Christians for the WWM. This article became instrumental in enhancing the understanding of this aspect of Pakistani Christians' life. It also helped in striking down a discriminatory policy of employing ***“only non-Muslims belonging to minorities”*** for janitorial work in Punjab in 2016. Academically, Saeed Shafqat, Professor & Founding Director of Centre for Public Policy and Governance (CPPG) at the FCCU, guided me in taking a holistic look at the caste system, rather than narrowing the scope to a single community.

Extensive discussions with Mary Gill, then a lawmaker of the Punjab Assembly, gave a new perspective to the subject. In 2015, Gill started a campaign for “Dignified Identity and Decent Occupation” for Christians.

and helping us understand the institutional landscape of the sanitation industry in Lahore.

By Asif Aqeel

CPPG Senior Research Fellow Raheem-ul-Haque helped in reviewing the research design. Policy analyst Fouad Bajwa provided critical help in compiling the research data. FCCU undergraduate student Basil Dogra has been of immense help in several areas of this inquiry, including putting citations, conducting surveys and bringing wonderful ideas during work on this research. Haroon Masih, district councilmember Sunil Gulzar, and minority councilor Asher Aryan have helped conduct the survey. Mansoor Gill has been instrumental in translating the survey instrument from English into Punjabi. Julia Bicknell and Asher John, the Deputy Editor of Pakistan Today, helped edit the report.

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Special thanks to Water and Sanitation Agency (WASA) Lahore Managing Director Zahid Aziz, Lahore Waste Management Company (LWMC) General Manager (Operations) Sohail Malik, WASA Public Relations Assistant Director Farhan Bella and WASA Manager (Treatment and Disposal) Rizwan Saeed for providing access to sanitation work-related data



Julia Bicknell

WWM Executive Director

image courtesy
[\(<https://twitter.com/juliabicknell/photo>\)](https://twitter.com/juliabicknell/photo)

PREFACE



Irfan Masih

Died in June 2017 while opening a sewer line in Umar Kot

It was Sunday, June 4, 2017. The first thing I saw on my Facebook was a post of sanitation worker Irfan Masih's death in Umar Kot, interior Sindh, who had died a couple of days ago. The doctors had refused to treat him because he was covered with filth and they were fasting for Ramadan when he was brought to the hospital after inhaling poisonous gases while working in a manhole. Not only Christians, but Muslims were equally outraged at this inhuman treatment by the doctors. But former Gujrat District Police Officer Sohail Zafar Chatta uniquely condemned this act. He posted on Facebook: "In solidarity with Irfan Masih; #IAMChoohra". Without thinking much, I posted on my Facebook wall: "Yes #IAMChoohra and I am proud of it". Nothing changed, but everything changed!

The next few days, filth kept pouring onto my post. The backlash was particularly from the Christian community. I had no idea that hatred of this expression is so deeply rooted. This changed me forever! I feel ashamed that I didn't speak for thousands of Irfan Masih before.

I had come to know about the hatred attached to it two years earlier while working with Asif Aqeel on a policy document for the protection of religious minorities, including a campaign **Dignified Identity, Decent Occupation** (باعزت شناخت، باوقار روزگار) along with the Dignified Identities Law banning the use of

derogatory terms like Bhangi, Chuhra, Essai used especially for Christians.

Punjab Lok Sujag (PLS) Director Tahir Mehdi was supportive of this stand and created a video on this backlash. The images in the video were agonizing. The data collected from the LWMC came as another shock. At least 250 sanitation workers had died at work. My question was clear: the forefathers of the Christians joined Pakistan because there was, apparently, no space for caste-based discrimination - but why it was continuing? I urged the Punjab government, through various means, that providing safety to sanitation workers was a prerequisite for Water Sanitation and Hygiene (WASH).

The next few months were full of extensive discussions on legislative and policy recommendations for socio-economic and political empowerment of minorities belonging to the "backward classes". In March 2015, I was appointed by the then Punjab Chief Minister Shehbaz Sharif as the Minority Advisory Council Punjab (MACP) Coordinator, the only notified body for minorities. Various legislative issues were brought onto the agenda of the council to have a coherent policy framework for minorities in the province. One of the major issues that surfaced was the Punjab Health Department's policy which clearly stated that only non-Muslims would be recruited for sanitation work.

During a high-profile meeting chaired by Mr. Sharif regarding the National Assembly constituency no. 125 elections, I requested him that this policy be struck down as it was discriminatory. Mr. Sharif was shocked to know this and ordered the health minister to strike it down, which was done in a month.

Another hurdle in this work was the absence of data on sanitation workers - even sanitation work related pictures were from India and not from Pakistan. The powerful movement in India named Safai Karamchar Andolan resulted in federal legislation "*The Prohibition of Employment as Manual Scavengers and their Rehabilitation Act 2013*". This campaign helped me think of something similar in Pakistan to ban this inhuman practice. Before leaving for the State Department's Legislative Fellowship Program (LFP) in 2017, I discussed this with South Asia Partnership Deputy Director Irfan Mufti and Mehdi. Mufti provided a study done by the Minority Rights Commission which exposed the horrible working conditions of sewer cleaners in Lahore. Mehdi was of the view that the inhuman practice must be banned, just like India did through legislative means. With this aim, I prepared my action plan for the legislative fellowship program and started the campaign to ban manual sewerage work in Pakistan.

My three weeks' placement in Philadelphia and work with Social Innovations Institute Director Nick Torres and Citizens Diplomacy International were life-changing experiences. Meeting with C. Drew Brown at the Philadelphia Water

Department and many Americans made me understand the safety of work issues that were mainly faced by African-Americans a few decades ago until the Memphis Strike (April 1968) laid the foundation for a dramatic change. For me, the biggest concern was what the alternative source of income would be for the Pakistani illiterate sanitation workers if the practice was banned. Automating the current sewage disposal system anytime soon in Pakistan was also almost impossible. Workers were saving lives by providing sanitation labor, particularly in cities, but they were invisible and given no respect.

After talking to my close friends like Salman Sufi and Irfan Mufti among a few others, I started a volunteer initiative in April 2019. The very word "Sweeper" is considered a pejorative term. The word is full of stigma and shame. The campaign challenge the stigma by opening a debate on it with the use of the word "Sweeper".

As a student at the CPPG, I requested the Professor Shafqat to help in analyzing existing legal and policy frameworks related to sanitation work. Some of it is reflected in this report, but it will be further worked on and published later. This report is in gratitude to everyone who has contributed in any way to this journey.



Professor Saeed Shafqat

Founding
Director of Centre for Public Policy
and Governance (CPPG) at the FCCU

image courtesy
(<http://cppg.fccollege.edu.pk/faculty/>)

By Mary Gill

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



A sanitation worker is working inside a manhole to open sewer lines

Sanitation is essential for any group of humans living in a fixed habitat. In Pakistan, work in this essential service is stigmatized and considered shameful. Our study found that sanitation workers face challenges in occupational safety and health and employment security that result in their death and disease, without appropriate wages. Rather than improving working conditions, the state and the society push the weakest and the most vulnerable communities into this occupation.

The Indian caste system attaches a severe stigma to sanitation, which continues in Pakistan. Social stigma and discrimination attached to sanitation in Pakistan are further rearticulated in religious overtones, which are unchecked in government policies, underresearched in academic writings and not taken up by civil society organizations.

Sanitation laborers in Pakistan are an invisible workforce; their job is dangerous and thankless. Even though the local government manages sanitation, working conditions are comparable to that of the informal sector and even with forced labor. Sanitation labor is life-threatening, intimidating, unhygienic and financially insecure work. People routinely die while doing their job. Exposure to disease is rampant because Occupational Safety and

Health (OSH) standards are not applied, and Personal Protection Equipment (PPE) is scarce and not mandatory.

The prevalent apathetic attitude towards sanitation workers arises from a traditional caste system that uniquely attaches birth to occupations one can choose. In the descent and work based social hierarchy, one born to a high-status priest family will be a priest and the one born to a low-status sanitation worker family, will work as a sanitation worker. This ruthless practice has died down to a large extent in Pakistan but sanitation is probably the only occupation where this traditional caste structure continues. This means that those born in the so-called untouchable sanitation castes are expected to work as sanitation laborers.

Stigma provides “justification” for systematic discrimination. Government job advertisements mention that janitorial work is reserved for non-Muslims only. Government policies, academic circles, and civil society organizations working on WASH in Pakistan have hardly considered this social evil. Because of this, a whole chapter on this confluence of caste and religion is dedicated to deal with the overlapping of caste and religion.

The study focuses on the city of Lahore, the capital of Punjab province with a population of 11 million. It employs the mixed-method – qualitative and quantitative tools – to understand and describe the phenomenon. The occupation is particularly associated with Christians because their overwhelming majority comes from the Dalit caste 'Chuhra' (which is translated as 'sweeper'), considered a highly pejorative term. It was found that Christians, despite constituting less than 5% of the city's population, make up more than 80% of the sanitation workforce.

There are two departments under the local government, responsible for sanitation in Lahore. The Water and Sanitation Agency (WASA) provides drinking water and ensures the smooth working of the sewerage systems. The Lahore Waste Management Company (LWMC) collects and disposes solid waste from households, industries and hospitals. It is also responsible for cleaning roads and streets. All the survey respondents, 102 in number, were from these two institutions.

WASA has 2,240 sanitation workers, out of which 1,609 are Christian. The LWMC has 9,000 workers and all of them are Christian. About 74% of the respondents never went to school. About 87% said “people, in general, think that janitorial work is only for Christians” while 72% said that their Muslim coworkers “believe that this work is not for them”.

The LWMC is a private company, sublet by the government. It operates through two contractors; hence, the state has no responsibility towards

LWMC sanitation workers. In the survey, 98% of non-regular employees expressed fear they could lose their job at any time. Workers are not regularized or considered government employees despite working for decades for the government of Pakistan.

Both WASA and the LWMC said that OSH protocols were in place and practice, but they could not provide any documentary evidence of it. Eighty-three percent of WASA sanitation workers only receive outdated tools for unclogging sewer lines i.e., a rope, a bamboo stick, a bucket, a hoe, a pick and a pair of pajamas.

The LWMC says that 70 sanitation workers died during work in 2019 alone. Deaths also take place due to poisonous gases while unclogging sewer lines. Moreover, no mechanism is in place to report and record on-job accidents or injuries.

The LWMC and WASA say they conducted periodic medical checkups, vaccinations or screenings. However, in our survey, 80% of workers denied receiving regular medical checkups, while 69% said there was no mechanism to deal with accidents and emergencies at the workplace.

In this state of affairs, the aim of achieving Sustainable Development Goal no. (related to sanitation) and no. 8 (related to ‘decent work agenda’), is ostensibly impossible to accomplish by 2030. Acknowledging the racial and religious overtones attached to sanitation work are the first steps towards addressing the issue at hand.

The report encourages Pakistan's Muslim majority to find the possibility of bringing the Islamic principle of 'dignity of labor' into the sanitation workplace. There is likely no other occupation in which Muslim workers invoke religion to avoid performing their duties while expecting their non-Muslim coworkers to perform them on their behalf.

- Introduction of ILO's Decent Work Agenda
- Revisiting labor and sanitation policies
- Recognizing sanitation workers as a marginalized group
- Allowing the job promotion of Christian sanitation workers
- Introducing laws that prohibit throwing garbage in drains

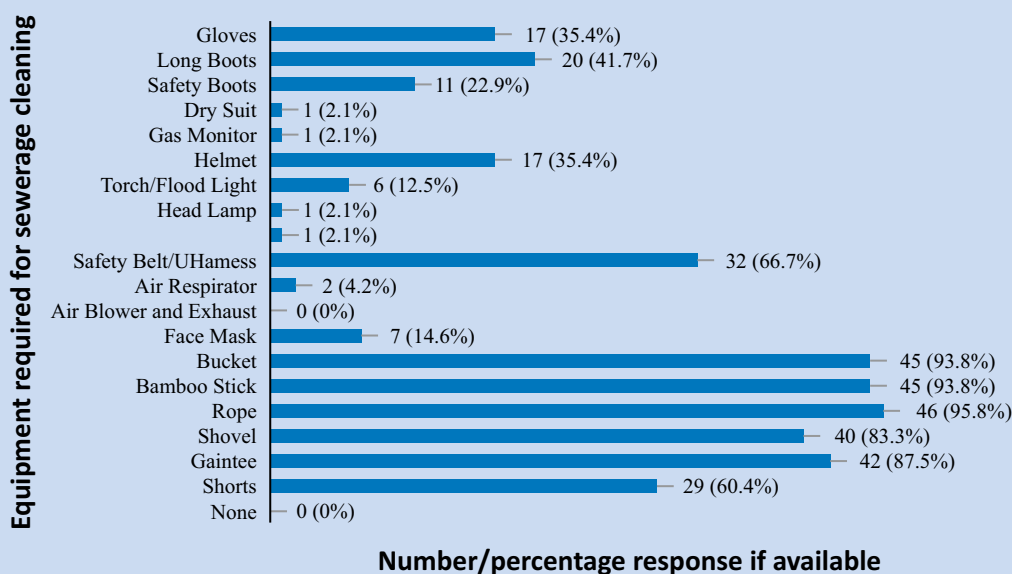
The report's recommendations include among many others:

- Banning of caste-based name-calling

Survey Question

Survey Question and results from 102 respondents

Q: When going down a manhole, which of the following equipment do you use?



DATA OF PUNJAB ASSEMBLY'S LOWEST GRADE JOB CATEGORIES

Data from any major institution like a school, college, university or hospital in Lahore shows that the overwhelming majority of sanitation workers is Christian. For example, according to its website, the Punjab Assembly has a total of 686 employees of which 47 are sanitation workers. Data on these 47 sanitation workers shows that only 3 are Muslim (this has been verified but the surname Masih, meaning "Christ", is also

sufficient to betray the fact). A casual look at various designations of the Assembly employees exposes the fact that other lowest-level jobs are mostly given to Muslims (as their Muslim names show). For example, the employees who do the work of dusting, peon, phone attendant, driver, and gardener are mainly Muslim, though their Basic Pay Scale is similar to those in the sanitation workers .

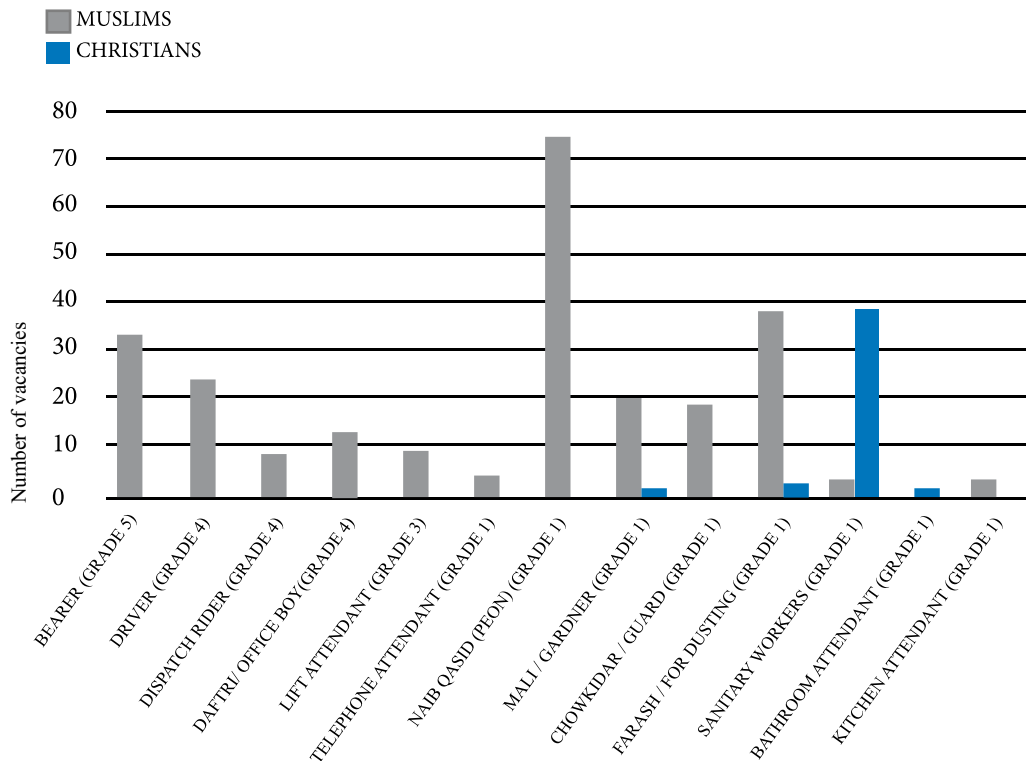


Table. 1
Religion Of Punjab Assembly Employees In 13 Lowest Level Work Categories

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

SANITATION: An Industry of Shame and Stigma



Sanitation workers lend hands to bring another worker out of a manhole

A head emerges from a hole in the road, dripping with water. Naked shoulders follow, and a naked torso. Arms lift through the water, lean heavily on the tarmac; and with a great effort the man heaves himself out of the sewer and lies on the street, gasping for breath. He is wearing only a pair of white pyjama trousers—now grey and wet. The hole from which he has surfaced swirls darkly with putrid water.

The day is pleasant, and he rests for a moment ... Eventually, he sits up, lowers himself into the hole again, until the water reaches his navel, then his armpits. Then he takes a deep breath, holds his nose, and ducks down beneath the surface.

I have come across this scene by chance, as I cut home through a housing colony ... Then, seeing a human emerging, almost naked, from a sewer, I think for a moment that I am hallucinating from dehydration.

Sitting nearby in the shade of a tree is another man, fully clothed, who has been watching me watching. 'Is he cleaning the sewer?' I ask, pointing down at the water. 'There's a blockage,' the man says. 'It must be a

difficult job,' I say. The man wipes the sweat off his forehead with the sleeve of his shirt: 'They've always done it.' 'Who?' I ask, wondering why he assumes that I know who 'they' are. 'The Bhangis,' comes his straightforward answer. 'I am the foreman. Only non-Muslims do this sewer work. It is forbidden for us.'

At the time, I refuse to believe him. But later, when I interview the government officials who control Karachi's hydrology—bringing fresh water in from the Indus lakes and piping sewage out into the mangroves—it is apparent that this is true. By 'Bhangi', the foreman means low-caste Hindus, or low-caste Christian converts ... still regarded as 'untouchable' according to the ancient and immutable Hindu caste system. 'Not one Muslim is doing this job,' the officials say. 'It is an age-old situation, right from the very beginning of Pakistan. This is dirty water. Any spots of sewerage on clothes is difficult when performing prayers.'

Empires of the Indus: The Story of a River (2008)

By English journalist and author Alice Albinia

Behavioral scientists tell us that “group living is essential to human survival” (Bowles and Gintis 2013). Sanitation becomes critically essential when group living takes place in a fixed habitat (Hassan 2015). In Pakistan, however, like many other underdeveloped countries, the importance of sanitation is least understood. The World Health Organization (WHO) and United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) declare that the availability of safe drinking water and hygienic sanitation facilities are a precondition for eradicating “poverty, hunger, child deaths and gender inequality. It is also central to human rights and personal dignity of every woman, man and child on earth” (UNICEF 2004).

Globally, about 2 billion people are without adequate sanitation facilities. (ADB 2006) Inadequate sanitation causes cholera, typhoid, dysentery, hepatitis A, polio and parasitic infections (Statistics 2018). Each year, 2.9 million people are affected with and 95,000 die of cholera. Between 10 and 11 million people get infected each year with typhoid and 128,000 to 161,000 die of it (WHO 2018).

Dysentery is the second leading cause of death among children under the age of five (WHO, Diarrhoeal Disease 2017). Fecal-oral contamination introduced through water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) related pathways can cause an inflammatory syndrome of the small intestine that results in child stunting (Lunn 2002) and cognitive impairment. In 2015, there were 150,000 cases of diarrhea reported in Sindh, Pakistan, alone (Dawn 2015).

Sanitation is also related to the water

insecurity paradigm of Pakistan, which is least understood. According to the World Bank's report titled “Pakistan: Getting More from Water”, water security in Pakistan is “undermined by poor water resource management and poor water service delivery — including irrigation and drainage services—and domestic water supply and sanitation services” (Young 2019).

In our view, Pakistan cannot think of progress in sanitation without ensuring dignity and safety for the workers.

1-1. Sanitation: A Thankless, Dangerous and Least Paying Labor

In Lahore, providing sanitation is the prime responsibility of the Water and Sanitation Agency (WASA). The act of providing water to people receives appreciative recognition in social, moral and religious ethos (پانی پیلانا ثواب کا کام ہے). But the sanitation laborers, working under the local government structure, perform their job in dehumanizing and potentially life-threatening conditions.

WASA envisions to “be a leader in sustainable water and waste-water management” but its mission statement is restricted to only water delivery service: “Committed to [sic] efficient and sustainable provision of water utility services for its consumers through developing and safeguarding Lahore's water resources”(Aziz 2019). This shows how sanitation workers remain an invisible, dehumanized workforce. Almost no discussion, documentary, or workshop on labor rights considers sanitary workers as a workforce.



A sanitation worker is doing his work in a manhole

Sanitation workplace has the following three distinguishing characteristics:

a. Life-Threatening and Intimidating Workplace: They Prefer to Die During Work Rather Than Go Home Without Wage

The ILO notes that globally 2,780,000

workers die from “unhealthy conditions of work ... one worker dies at least every 30 seconds” (Council 2019). There is no precise data related to on-job deaths of sanitation workers. The Minority Rights Commission in Pakistan in 2012 reported that 70 sanitary workers had died since 1988 in Lahore alone (Habib 2012). We have collected some incidents from media reports:

Table. 2

Data on the death of sewer workers from 2011-2021

| (Date) | (Location) | (Names of Sanitation Workers) | (Religion) |
|------------------|---|---|------------------------|
| 2011 | Upper Mall, Qurban Lines, Lahore, Punjab (Habib 2012) | Not Known | Not Known |
| January 2012 | Saharish Nagar, Hyderabad, Sindh (Habib 2012) | Dhani Baksh, Zafar Abbas, Muzaffar Jafferi, Sanaullah | Muslims |
| March 16, 2012 | Sector I-9/4, Islamabad (Laity 2012) | Sikandar Masih | Christian |
| May 2012 | Bedian Road, Lahore, Punjab (Habib 2012) | Asif Masih, Ghulam Masih | Christian |
| July 2012 | Qalandarpura, Harbanspura, Lahore, Punjab (Habib 2012) | Darshan Masih | Christian |
| June 1, 2017 | Chorr Road, Umerkot, Sindh (Aqeel 2017) | Irfan Masih | Christian |
| July 3, 2017 | Ara Basti, Bahawalpur, Punjab (christiansinpakistan.com 2017) | Saleem Masih, Danish Masih, Nadeem Masih | Christian |
| January 20, 2018 | Korangi, Karachi, Sindh (Aqeel 2018) | Shahzad Masih | Christian |
| May 23, 2018 | Qaziwala Road, Bahawalnagar, Punjab (Aqeel 2018) | Saqib Masih, Mushtaq Masih | Christian |
| August 26, 2018 | Hussainabad, Hyderabad, Sindh (The News 2018) | Pyaro Bheel, Umar Bheel | Scheduled Caste Hindus |
| April 1, 2019 | Luddan, Vehari (Imran 2019) | Akmal Masih and Rizwan Masih | Christian |
| April 4, 2019 | Motly, Shujabad, Multan, Punjab (dunyanews.tv 2019) | Not Known | Not Known |

| (Date) | (Location) | (Names of Sanitation Workers) | (Religion) |
|-------------------|--|---|------------------|
| September 8, 2018 | Kamaha Road, Nishtar Colony, Lahore, Punjab (International 2018) | Shahzad, Khawar, Imran | Not Known |
| August 25, 2019 | Babar Market, Landhi No. 2, Karachi, Sindh (Dawn 2019) | Rafiq Masih | Christian |
| September 6, 2019 | Comprehensive High School, B Division, Dera Ghazi Khan, Punjab (Ismail 2019) | Muhammad Ramzan, Muhammad Haider, Muhammad Nadeem | Muslims |
| October 25, 2019 | Shah Latif Town, Karachi, Sindh (Dogar 2019) | Sohail Arshad Masih, Enoch Masih | Christian |
| April 25, 2020 | Khiyali Dawraza, Gujranwala, Punjab, | Ashiq Masih | Christian |
| June 6, 2020 | Mirza Parrha, Hyderabad, Sindh | Aslam Masih, Mustafa Sheikh | Christian Muslim |
| September 7, 2020 | Sector 5-G, Madina Colony, Karachi, Sindh | Not Know | Not Know |
| April 28, 2021 | Nawab Shah, Sindh | Naimat Masih | Christian |
| April 28, 2021 | Faisalabad Punjab | Allah Rakha Masih | Christian |

Sewer lines in Pakistan range from a few inches to a few feet wide. The clogged sewer lines are opened through shoving in a long bamboo stick. If this technique does not work, sewer workers go down the manholes (sometimes dive in sewer-filled manholes with naked bodies). This act is life-threatening as clogged sewer lines emit poisonous gases in the manhole when the blockage is removed. One such widely reported incident is of June 2017 in which three sanitation workers fainted and one died. That incident is the primary motivational force behind this study.

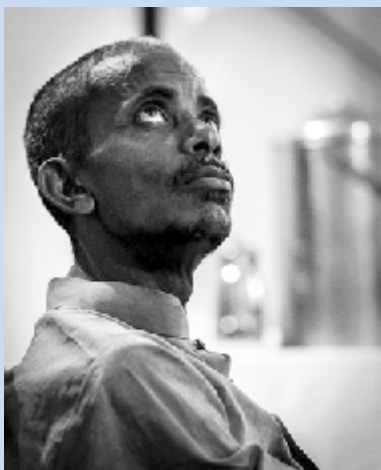
Irfan Masih, a 36-year-old Christian sewer man of Umar Kot in interior Sindh,¹ fell victim to toxic fumes while trying to save his two coworkers who had fallen unconscious inside a manhole. The three were deployed to unclog a dangerous sewer line that had been blocked for several months. According to media reports, Irfan and the other two Christian workers had objected that the lines had been clogged for a long time and would be filled with poisonous gases “but the three inspectors told them that they either open the clogged lines or quit their jobs”

1. Masih is a surname, which means Christ.

2. #SweepersAreSuperheroes is a social media campaign (<https://twitter.com/sewperheroes>; <https://www.facebook.com/sewperheroes/>). The campaign aims to highlight the life-threatening work conditions like exposure to diseases, toxic substances medical waste and poisonous gasses. For this dangerous work, these workers receive a collective apathetic, even hateful societal response.

Story.1

Work at the cost of life



(A sanitation worker from Lahore)

In May this year, they asked me to unblock a gutter that is often clogged because of its faulty design. When I was called in to fix it, it had been two months since the blockage. However, I went 26 feet down the ground through in a 2-foot hole, hanging by a rope.

Down there, I got to work, clearing away the blockage. Within a few minutes, I had trouble breathing because of sewer gas. But I didn't stop working until I felt I was about to collapse; subsequently, I raised alarm and began climbing upward. I fell unconscious before I reached the end and was pulled out by my handlers.

I remained lifeless for more than an hour and, due to the lack of proper gear, my colleagues could only try and revive me with the help of remedies.

Due to the questionable work environment, I was too scared to speak to my supervisor about the accident, as I knew he wouldn't cooperate.

Irfan and the other two Christian sanitary workers were rushed to the hospital in an unconscious state. The Muslim duty doctors, who were fasting as it was the month of Ramadan, refused to treat them because they were covered in filth. The two sanitary workers were rushed to another hospital and were saved but Irfan succumbed to the poisonous gases he had inhaled. Masih's resilience and passion to save his coworkers motivated the authors to launch the "Sweepers are Superheroes" social media campaign.²

b. Unhygienic Workplace

There are no OSH standards applied to the sanitation industry. A recent media report published in the Daily Urdu Express (September 26, Karachi edition) says that about 2,000 sanitary

workers in Lahore responsible for sewerage cleaning were sick because of exposure to various diseases and were leading a miserable life in abject poverty and helplessness (Talib 2019).

c. Financially Insecure Workplace

The major proportion of sanitary workers also lacks employment security (MCI Sanitary Workers Vulnerable to Exploitation 2019). Government departments employ a significant number of sanitation workers on an 89-day contract. These daily wage employees are forced into life-threatening and disease-causing work conditions through the fear of losing their job. To avoid any legal liability, the government departments engage contractors who often give a salary of less than USD 50 a month to sanitation workers.

As in Masih's case, the threat of being unemployed is used as a primary tool to force the workers into life-threatening and unhygienic work conditions. Despite working for government agencies and contractors responsible for sanitation and waste management for years, a significant percentage of the workforce is hired on a temporary contract of 89 days or as a daily wage worker. Even this meager salary is often delayed for many months.

1-2. Stigma in Sanitation Labor in Pakistan

Sanitation is considered an insulting occupation in South Asian culture. It is reserved only for the 'outcastes'; thereby, only the most vulnerable groups are forced into this labor. In Pakistan, these workers live in abject poverty in shantytowns without basic amenities. Almost all of them are illiterate and suffer shame for working in this occupation. People do not like to associate with them and refuse to use the same utensils used by them in public or private places.

As the work is often associated with “non-Muslims” (but more precisely Christians and Scheduled Caste Hindus) (Huda 2019), a larger number of sanitation workers comes from minority religions. In September 2016, the Punjab government, at last, struck down the discriminatory policy of recruiting only non-Muslims for the job of sanitation, partly thanks to our campaigning (Bajwa 2015). This discriminatory policy, however, continues in other provinces.

There are reports that Christians, who

apply for government jobs with a rank little higher than a sanitation worker, are forced back into sanitation work (Gill 2016). In 2017, sanitation workers in Hyderabad were forced to take an oath on their holy scriptures that “they will never do anything else but work as a sanitary worker, and will never refuse to carry out the work” (AHRC 2017).

In Lahore, our research shows that the overwhelming majority of sanitation workers are Christian by religion. It is almost always a Christian sanitation worker who goes down the manhole with a naked body to unclog sewer lines. One respondent, during our research, informed us that Muslim coworkers tell Christians that they are “born for this work”. The traditional caste word for a sanitation worker is 'Chuhra' or 'Bhangi', which are a term of abuse. As many Christians in Pakistan come from this caste, they suffer caste-based name-calling, comparable with the N-word.

Muslim sanitation workers, who join the profession under economic pressures, consider the job against their faith and often skip the dirty work. In March 2018, a Supreme Court-appointed judicial commission ordered the Karachi municipal authorities to “dismiss all Muslim sanitation workers from service after being informed that the employees refuse to do jobs such as cleaning sewers” (Baloch 2018). In January 2019, the councilors of Swabi, Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, demanded, through a resolution, that only Christians be recruited as sweepers because Muslim sanitation workers were not performing their duty (Huda 2019).

اشتہار برائے بھرتی خالی آسامیاں
ورک چارج کی بنیاد پر

ہر عام و عام کوٹھن کیا جاتا ہے کہ کیو۔ بی۔ لنک ڈویژن فاروق آباد تحصیل وطن شیخوپورہ کو روٹن ذیل خالی آسامیاں کیلئے موزوں امیدواران سے سادہ کاغذ پر درخواستیں مطلوب ہیں۔ بھرتی ورک چارج کی بنیاد پر عرصہ مورہ 15-2-2010ء تا 30-6-2010ء تک کیلئے ہوگی۔

امیدواران اپنی درخواستیں مورہ 13-2-2010ء تک دفتر ایگنیشن صاحب کیو۔ بی۔ لنک ڈویژن فاروق آباد تحصیل وطن شیخوپورہ میں دفتر نام کے اندر جمع کرانیں اور ادرجہ کیلئے مورہ 15-2-2010ء کو وقت 10:00 بجے تک حاضر ہوں۔

| نمبر | نام آسامی | سیکی | تعداد | عمر | تالیف |
|------|-------------|---|-------|----------------------|--|
| 1 | سوچی | (گھوڑہ کورنٹ کے کلورگر ریڈیو آف ڈیپارٹمنٹ کے ملازم) | 10 | 30 تا 18 سال (ڈیفنر) | خواندہ اور صحت مند (امیدوار کیلئے یہ سائی ہونا ضروری ہے) |
| 2 | سیکوری گارڈ | ایٹا | 5 | ایٹا | خواندہ اور صحت مند ہو |

ایگزیکٹو انجینئر
 کیو۔ بی۔ لنک ڈویژن فاروق آباد تحصیل وطن شیخوپورہ IPL-1220

An advertisement requiring that the applicant for the sanitation work must be Christian



An advertisement from Pakistan Army requiring only Christians to apply for sanitation work.

In August 2014, a Muslim sewer cleaner, Abid Hussein, from Multan, prayed to the government through a national Urdu newspaper:

I appeal to WASA officials that for God's sake get me out of this occupation. I have adopted this occupation due to poverty, but it is crushing me inside. Please depute me as a helper or a security guard (instead of a sewer worker). My conscience is killing me that I used to be a (religious) man who recited the Holy Quran and offered daily prayers but now living in filth all the time. This work has drifted me away from my faith. I urge the government to give the poor the right to live.

Hussein also deplores the attitude of society:

Though I am a Muslim, people do not consider us human beings. If anyone gives us water, it is served in a used plastic bottle or a broken bowl so that it could later be discarded ... people do not like to shake hands with us. Even our relatives feel ashamed meeting us.

1-3. Dignity and Decent Work

The concept of human dignity is both legal and philosophical. In ancient times, dignity was associated with ranks, e.g., the dignity of the king was a status associated with rank (Waldron, et al. 2012). Roman orator Cicero says “the dignity that human beings have is solely because they are

human, not animals.” Probably the most extensive work on human dignity is done by Michael Rosen. He writes that the “idea of a reversal of status—‘the last shall be first’— is a fundamental trope in Christian social thought”. German theologian Jürgen Moltmann, the author of *On Human Dignity*, says: “The dignity of each and every human being is grounded in [its] objective likeness of God”. Rosen further writes that Emmanuel Kant has “played an important role historically in connecting dignity with the idea of all human beings having unconditional, intrinsic value” (Waldron, et al. 2012).

Jeremy Waldron discusses whether dignity can be interpreted as “honor” or “worth”. He notes that honor “is contingent, in the sense that it is earned or granted ... Since [Emmanuel] Kant, and with increasing momentum in the last few decades or so, honor has been superseded by worth as the favored interpretation of dignity” (Waldron, et al. 2012, 10) and dignity means “a moral right to be free from insult” (Shaoping and Lin 2009).

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) is grounded on “inherent dignity” (United Nations 2015). Article 1 of the Grundgesetz (Basic Law) of the Federal Republic of Germany (1949) says “Human dignity is inviolable.” Lastly, the Punta del Este Declaration of 2018 on Human Dignity calls dignity for everyone everywhere (Punta Del Este Declaration on Human Dignity for Everyone Everywhere: Seventy Years after the Universal Declaration of Human Rights 2018).

With this introduction to dignity, we believe dignified and decent work is the way forward for sanitation workers, established as the core issue in the Memphis Sanitation Strike. In February 1968 in Memphis, Tennessee, hundreds of sanitation workers gathered to protest their poor working conditions. Garbage collectors were expected “to work long hours for meager wages and without overtime pay” (Coleman 2020). Workers had long been demanding “properly functioning equipment” (Coleman 2020).

On February 1st of that year, two sanitation workers, Echol Cole and Robert Walker were crushed to death

in a garbage compactor. According to the History Channel, “Cole and Walker had taken shelter from rain in the back of their truck, when it malfunctioned and both men were crushed to death” (Coleman 2020). Workers demanded compensation for the families of the deceased workers but the government refused and the workers stopped their work and organized the strike. Martin Luther King Junior joined the strike because most of the sanitation workers were of African-American origin. The city administration declared the strike “illegal”. However, the movement, under the slogan “I am a Man!”, brought a change in the coming years and today sanitation work conditions in the US have dramatically improved. The movement shows how dignity in sanitation work is an issue across the globe, but there is hope and a change is also possible.



Participants at the Memphis Strike demand dignity, claiming they be considered human beings.

image courtesy - History Channel



US President Barack Obama is met Memphis Strike survivors in 2011

image courtesy - White House Archives

CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND

CASTE, CROSS AND CRESCENT

Untouchables

By Tom O'Neill

The sins of Girdharilal Maurya are many, his attackers insisted. He has bad karma. Why else would he, like his ancestors, be born an Untouchable, if not to pay for his past lives?

Look, he is a leatherworker, and Hindu law says that working with animal skins makes him unclean, someone to avoid and revile. And his unseemly prosperity is a sin. Who does this Untouchable think he is, buying a small plot of land outside the village?

Then he dared speak up, to the police and other authorities, demanding to use the new village well. He got what Untouchables deserve.

One night, while Maurya was away in a nearby city, eight men from the higher Rajput caste came to his farm. They broke his fences, stole his tractor, beat his wife and daughter, and burned down his house. The message was clear: Stay at the bottom where you belong (O'Neill 2003).

(Excerpt from National Geographic June 2003)



A sanitation worker

image courtesy - Dur e Ajam Wasif

When the Uzbek warrior Muhammad Zahir ud-Din Babur conquered parts of the Indian subcontinent and founded the Mughal Empire in the early sixteenth century, he wrote about the caste-based division of labor in his book Babur Nama:

Another good thing in Hindustan is that it has unnumbered and endless workmen of every kind. There is a fixed caste for every sort of work and for everything, which has done that work or that thing from father to son till now. (Rapson et al 1922)

Janitorial jobs like sweeping streets and manually removing excreta and dead animals were assigned to the Chandalas who were an “outcaste” because of their past imaginary “sins”. They were excluded from social, religious, economic and political life as a “punishment”. They were not just untouchable but were “also unseeable and one with whom talking was prohibited” (Banerjee 1999). Fourth century famous Chinese Buddhist monk and translator Faxian (Fa-Hien), who traveled by foot from China to India, noted that the Chandalas were supposed to live outside the city and “whenever they entered the city, they had to strike a piece of wood as a notice of their approach”. (Isaian *de thathi* [عیسائیان [دی ٹھٹھی], a separate place for Christians in villages owes to this millennia-old treatment). Another Chinese Buddhist monk who visited the region in the seventh century observed the same (Rai 2014).

Catholic Irish priest John O'Brien in his seminal research writes that around

the 15th century, the Chandalas got divided into three occupational sub-castes: Chamar, Chuhra and Dom (O'Brien 2006, 33). From the 1870s to the 1920s, the people who belonged to the Chuhra caste converted to Christianity in Punjab (Stock and Margaret 1975). They adopted the surname Masih, meaning Christ, and dropped the Chuhra appellation. In 1881 census, these people asked to be recorded as a Chuhra and not as a Bhangi. Today, the word Chuhra is synonymous with 'lowborn', 'filthy', 'deprived of morals and values', and of 'low intellect'. Probably, for this reason, the 1961 census substituted the word Christian for the Chuhra for these people (O'Brien 2006, 25). Until today, legal documents mention the caste of Christians as “Isai” or “Christian”.



A sanitation worker
image courtesy - Dur e Ajam Wasif

2-1. Caste over Millennia in South Asia

The caste system is unique to the Indian subcontinent. The Portuguese who arrived in India in the sixteenth century called this occupational endogamy as *casta*, meaning “race, lineage” (Merriam-Webster 2019). From ‘*casta*’ the English language word ‘caste’ is derived, which has been prevalent for over millennia in the subcontinent.

Sociologically, caste is defined as “a group that interacts economically with people outside it (through specialized economic roles), but segregates itself socially through endogamy (which prevents people from marrying outsiders)” (Reich 2018). Sociologist Ian Robertson defines caste as a “closed form of social stratification in which status is determined by birth

and is lifelong” (Robertson 1977, 217), while Britannica defines castes as “socially ranked occupational categories”. We can think it is a system that “determines whom one can marry and what privileges and roles one has in society” (Reich 2018, 140).

Genetic, ethnographic (O’Brien 2006, 9) and linguistic (Diamond 2006, 225) studies show that Eurasian nomadic people started arriving around 1500 (Britannica 2010) to 2000 B.C. (Reich 2018, 141) when the Indus Valley Civilization was declining, probably because of ecological reasons. The “fairer-skinned” (Britannica, Madan 2019) Indo-Iranians, commonly known as the Aryans, came down from the Ural Mountains (Witzel 2014) and overtook the Plains of Punjab (Kenoyer 1998, 19). The Encyclopedia Britannica notes that before coming to India, a “threefold division of society into priests, warriors, and commoners was a part of the Aryan heritage” (Britannica, Madan, Caste 2019). These Aryans gave birth to the Vedic religion, now referred to as Hinduism. (The Upper three castes – Brahman, Kshatriya and Vaish – in the Hindu literature are defined as “Aryans”).

The Rig-Veda, the most authoritative and the earliest Hindu scripture, describes the locals as *dasa* (slave/servant) (Britannica 2010). The Aryans chronicled the *dasas* as “dark-skinned, harsh-spoken people and worshipers of phallus” (Britannica 2010). The locals whom Aryans added into the threefold social organization were called Shudras (Thanseem, et al. 2006). The confluence of races may have been organized into four broader

classes known as *varna* (literally meaning “color” in Sanskrit) as the Britannica explains: “The Sanskrit word *varna* has many connotations, including description, selection, classification and color. Of these, it is color that appears to have been the intended meaning of the word as used by the Aryan authors of the Rigveda” (Britannica, Madan, Caste: Varna 2019).

In the grand scheme of things, Hindus believe that humankind originated from the body parts of the Cosmic Being or Brahma (Redvers 2019, 88). From Brahma’s head came out Brahmans (priests), from the chest the Kshatriyas (rulers and warriors), from the thighs the Vaishyas (landlords and businessmen) and from his feet came out the Shudras (laborers and serfs). Because they came from different body parts of varying importance so human beings are born “with unequal capacities, in order to perform functions of unequal importance” (Dhesi 2006, 85); hence, we got the four varnas. The upper three varnas, the Aryans, have special privileges:

These three varnas together were deemed to be “twice-born” (dvija). They (the Vaishyas) were also entitled alongside their social superiors (Brahmans and Kshatriyas) to demand and receive menial services from the Shudras, the fourth and lowest ranked varna. Certain degrading occupations, such as disposal of dead animals, excluded some Shudras from any physical contact with the “twice-born” varnas. Considered untouchable, they



A sanitation worker
image courtesy - Dur e Ajam Wasif

were simply dubbed “the fifth” (*panchama*) category (Britannica, Madan, Caste 2019).

At the lower level, caste is organized from 3,000 to 40,000 endogamous groups known as *jati* (Reich 2018, 141). These *jatis* are further divided into *gotra*, *biradri*, *bhaiband* or *alle* (literally meaning ‘family’ in Arabic). Traditionally marriage takes place within the *jati* but not within the *gotra*. (Our research has found that Pakistani Christians do not marry within their *gotra* unless they become Muslim). In this study, by caste we only mean *jati* and not *varna*, which is often the case in Pakistan.

The upper three *varnas* are classified as “high” while the fourth one, Shudra, is classified as “low” or “menial”. Those outside these four class system, including foreigners, are dubbed as the “outcaste” or “pariah”. Hence, we get three broader classes: upper, lower and outcaste. The thousands of *jatis* are fixed into these three broader categories.

The three social classes based on economic division of labor are further religionized on a purity scale: clean, unclean and untouchable. Each endogamous group or *jati* is placed within the *varnas*, assigned an occupation, and is thereby considered “clean”, “menial” or “degraded”.

a. Religionization of Caste

But how did the Hindus maintain this overarching caste schema, especially when only Brahmans were allowed to study religious scriptures? To ensure socio-religious dharma-based caste

practices, the Hindu society invented self-governing courts of law. At the *varna* level, the court was called a *saba* (Sanskrit, meaning “assembly”) (Britannica, “Saba” n.d.). Following this tradition, the upper and the lower legislatures in India are also named Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha. The court at the *jati* level was called a *panchayat* (Sanskrit meaning “five”; now called as local government’s union council in India and extrajudicial village council in Pakistan) (Britannica, “Panchayat: Indian Caste Government” n.d.).

2-2. “Sinful” Nature of Sanitation Labor

Traditional Hinduism teaches that once born, the process of rebirth infinitely continues until consciously stopped. The soul passes “through a cycle of successive lives (*samsara*) and its next incarnation is always dependent on how the previous life was lived (*karma*)” (BBC 2006). The soul is immortal, while the body that houses it, is mortal and perishable. Hence there is a chance to be born in a better caste in the next incarnation, but that is contingent upon accumulating good karma or good deeds in the present life.

The ultimate goal of salvation (*moksha* or *mukti*) is getting rid of *samsara* or endless births, which is attained by adopting the prescribed dharma for each caste. Dharma is “everything a person ought to do in life ... both religious and secular” (Banerjee 1999). The following dharma according to one’s caste is essential. This is why the “soul of the person suffers in the next birth or enjoys, according to as his doings in



*A sanitation worker is picking garbage without protective gear
image courtesy - Dur e Ajam Wasif*

Figure.1

The Varna-based Division of Labor as Pictured by BBC (BBC, What is India's caste system? 2019)



this world are bad or good [sic] ... after the death of one body, the soul takes another body according to his deeds ... Those of good conduct will be born as Brahmans, Kshatriyas or Vaishya, while those of bad conduct will be born as dogs, swine or Chandalas” (Prabhu 1940, 21). Hence an accursed person - as a punishment - deserves to stay in a humiliating occupation because of past sins. People’s general indifference to the fate of sanitation workers could be seen as ‘natural’ - even if they are being killed in a gutter of poisonous gases.

2-3. Contentious Caste: A Defining Feature of Indian Culture or a Colonial Artifact?

Anthropologist Bernard S. Cohn writes that the Indian caste system arose from its geography, climate, the system of rivers and the agricultural economy. Because of this, the “Caste Hindu economy is based on plow agriculture and production for markets” (Cohn 1971, 19). Cohn notes that rivers, monsoon rains and harvest times have given rise to religious and cultural festivals like Basant, Baisakhi, Holi and Diwali in the region

(Cohn 1971, 17). Hence, the social, economic and religious milieu is uniquely blended into the caste hierarchy. When Pakistan was created in 1947, about 90 percent of the population of the country was living in villages. Until today, more than 60 percent of the population is attached to agriculture. Hence, caste is more prevalent in villages but urban areas are also not immune to it.

But many critics believe that caste was created by the British and now it is not relevant anymore. Caste boundaries may be hardened because of its documentation but evidence from religion, as presented in the last section, shows its continuation over a more extended period than all together fabricated during the colonial period. Western social scientists have looked at this argument in light of the genetic evidence available and have proved the existence of the caste system before the British period.

French anthropologist Louis Dumont defines caste as a structural hierarchical social stratification, based on agreed religious values (Dumont 1980, 35) of ritual purity and impurity, and “intimately connected” with “division of labor” (Dumont 1980,91). This hierarchical social structure is only possible in a collectivist culture; as Ferdinand Tönnies observed that caste was *Gemeinschaft* (community) whose “members think of such a grouping as a gift of nature or created by supernatural will” (Tönnies and Loomis 1940, 24). Compared to Dumont’s structuralist view, Max Weber considered caste as a hierarchical structure, composed of closed “status groups” that maintain the “status distinction” by rituals. He

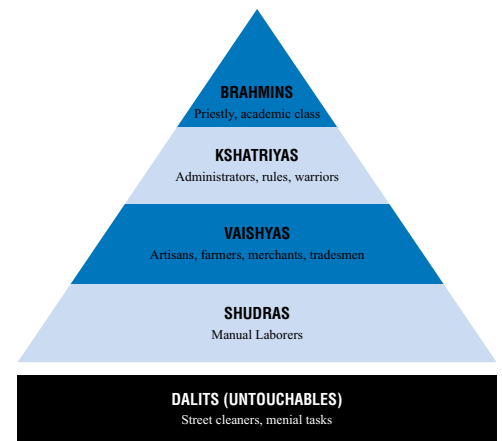
writes that every physical contact between the members of different castes is described as symbolic interaction between the “low” and “high” and “making for a ritualistic impurity and to be a stigma which must be expiated by a religious act” (Weber 1946, 188).

Dumont also observes that caste has survived among non-Hindu faiths, e.g. Christians and Muslims. He analyzed caste-based stratification among Muslims, known as “Islamic castes” (T. E. Britannica 2015). Muslims of Arab descent (Syed and Sheikh), Pashtuns (roughly Afghan) and Mughals constitute the Ashraf. The non-Ashraf, or *Ajlaf* (low) were Hindu converts, including untouchables (Dumont 1980, 203) (sometimes called *Arzal*) (Krishnan 2010). Confirming Dumont, the Commissioner of 1881 Census, Denzil Ibbetson, identifies that caste was more a social institution than religious: “Caste is a social far more than a religious institution ... and that conversion from Hinduism to Islam has not necessarily the slightest effect upon caste” (Ibbetson 1883, 2). Fredrik Barth equates the Brahmanic pure-impure dichotomy “to the notions ashraf and ajlaf, the former being of lighter complexion and belonging to the dominant-political elite, the latter being dark-skinned associated with ancestral professions as artisans and peasants” (Barth 1960, 152).

But thousands of castes do not nicely fit in the described categories as one may want to believe. Revisionist anthropologist Nicholas Dirks has enriched our understanding of the complex nature of the caste system, although not very accurately.

Figure. 2

The socioeconomic and religious hierarchy in the India caste system



Following Edward Said's footsteps, Dirks describes Dumont's work as an ideological reductionism intended to recast caste as something that emerged during the colonial rule of the British. He also argues that if caste is essential to Hinduism, then Hinduism as a single religion is a colonial creation (Dirks 2001, 5). He is right as in certain cases as caste, especially Muslims, has been quite fluid as Ibbetson identifies: "Still more is this the case with the Mughal, Shekh, and Saiyad, who are only strangers in the land. 'Last year I was a weaver (julaha); this year I am a Shekh; next year if prices rise I shall be a Saiyad'" (Ibbetson 1883, 10).

Ibbetson's and Dirks' observations cannot wholly be accepted as a complete story on caste. Colonialism may have hardened caste boundaries, but we know that before the introduction of modern education, industrialization, western-modeled urbanization and transportation like railways (which came in the middle of the nineteenth century to these lands), there was very little social mobility. All males, "whether urban or rural, tended to stay within their traditional occupations as defined by caste or clan". People married "within their castes and lineage groups" and social life and social standing were "deeply communal rather than individual in nature, in what was a profoundly hierarchical social structure" (Webster 2007, 29).

Genetic studies confirm that there was slow mobility because of jati-based endogamous group living. For example, geneticist Spencer Wells writes that DNA data showed that "women could move between castes

while men were locked into theirs" (Wells 2017, 177). The David Reich-led study discards Dirks' view on caste: "Rather than an invention of colonialism, as Dirks suggested, long-term endogamy as embodied in India today, in the institution of caste, has been overwhelmingly important for millennia" (Reich 2018, 145).

The significance and relevance of caste to sanitation in our context can be further understood by the fact that 60 percent of open defecation takes place in South Asia. Almost half of the Indian population defecates in the open. Texas University scholar Sangita Vyas in her illuminating TEDTalk (Vyas 2015) said that lack of latrines is associated with poverty in the rest of the world, but in India, it is related to the caste system. Latrines need to be cleaned "by hand" (you either pour water or press a button to flush it). Historically, this is the job for an untouchable. "People from middle and upper castes would find it inconceivable to empty a pit latrine by hand themselves," she says. In their widely read research paper, Vyas and her research colleague Dean Spears observe that "certain practices in Hinduism influence sanitation through strict observance of rituals of purity and pollution." The existence of caste in India has vestiges in Pakistan. One-eighth of the population in Pakistan practice open defecation (UNICEF n.d.).

2-4. Caste Stigma for Christians and Disappearance of Muslim "Sweepers"

Stigma legitimizes and justifies discrimination. The UN Special Rapporteur on the right to safe

drinking water and sanitation noted the following in her 2009 report:

Stigma and discrimination are closely interrelated; they reinforce and legitimize each other. Stigma often lies at the root of discrimination; it is an antecedent to and a rationale for discrimination. It provides a justification so that discrimination is seen as natural, necessary and desirable. Stigma plays an insidious role in making systemic discrimination possible (Albuquerque 2012).

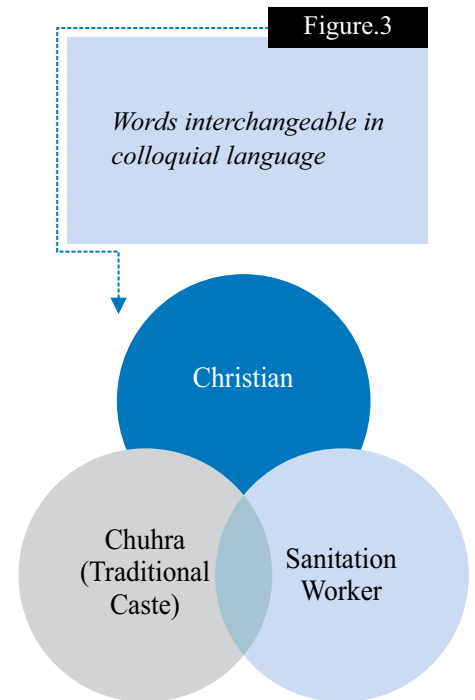
Today, a large number of Christians, who converted from the Chuhra caste, are in the occupation of sanitation. Christians are insulted with the name-calling of Chuhra.

From the 1870s to 1930s, there was *en masse* conversion to Christianity through extensive missionary work among the Chuhra in villages in Punjab (Harding 2008, 11). These Christian converts were largely dependent on Sikh landlords as they were landless peasants. In August 1947, after the partition of India, Sikh landlords left Pakistan. The land vacated by Sikhs was distributed among Muslim migrants who did not need their labor in the fields. Rather Christian converts were forced to do sanitation work without any payment because caste structures were still in practice in Pakistan, especially in the context of sanitation work. On January 20, 1948, Punjab Assembly Christian lawmaker S. P. Singha stated on the floor of the house:

(In Lahore), an army man was passing by a village where Christians were living. To buy some bread he went into the village and found that refugees (who had come from India) had confined the Christians in the village and had killed five of them, including one pregnant woman. The issue was that they asked them to do the labor (as a sweeper) which they had refused, saying that they (the Christians) would pick up dead animals (work for untouchables) only if they were paid a wage which these refugees refused ... there is a common complaint that they (the Christians) are being forced to do the work that untouchables were doing before.

The number of homeless Christians had further increased by April 1952. C.E. Gibbon, another member of the Punjab Assembly, stated,

“I beg to ask for leave to make a motion... to discuss a definite matter of urgent public importance, namely, the grave situation arising out of the policy of the government in respect of the wholesale eviction of Christian Sepis, Athirs (untouchable peasants) and tenants from their home holdings, thus rendering nearly 300,000 Christians homeless and on the verge of starvation, the consequences of which are too horrible to imagine” (Najmee, et al. 2001).



These Christians over the years moved to cities where they were forced into sanitation work.

But what happened to Chuhras who converted to Islam? According to Indian author Harnam Singh, the total Muslim population in the 1931 Census in Punjab was 14,929,896 out of which one-third or 4,695,957 were dependent, Shudra or menial castes (Singh 1945, 2). He notes there were 412,300 “Mussallis” (untouchable Muslims from the Chuhra caste), among them. The 1931 Census notes that “When a [Hindu] Chuhra becomes a Mazhabi (Sikh) or a Mussalli (Muslim) he, as a rule, gives up the work of scavenging”

Today, almost all these caste-based occupations have died down in cities. The *Mussalli*, as a name-calling, has also died down, at least in cities. However, it has existed in the case of

Christians. Social psychologist Ervin Goffman's pioneering work on stigma helps explain this phenomenon.

Goffman describes stigma as an attribute or a “mark” that devalues a person or a social group. He writes that societies create “categories” of persons and complements them with “attributes”. Goffman writes in his classical work *Stigma: Notes on the Management of a Spoiled Identity* (1963) three different types of stigma can be defined based on these attributes: physical stigma, the stigma of character and “tribal stigma of race, nation, and religion”.

The complex social construct of caste has three important elements: repulsion, hierarchy and hereditary specialization (Sankaran, Sekerdej and Hecker 2017). Birth in a Chuhra caste was a mark of stigma. Their

Table. 3

Population of the Punjab according to 1931 census

| Caste | Population | Caste | Population |
|-------------------------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|
| Beggar فقير | 256,533 | Oilmen تیلی | 344,927 |
| Weavers جلابا | 612,579 | Bards | 244,330 |
| Herdsmen چراها | 421,347 | Barbers نائی | 296,104 |
| Cobblers موچی | 464,218 | Blacksmiths لوہار | 241,972 |
| Potter کمہار | 423,617 | Washermen دھوبی | 162,224 |
| Mussallis or convert sweepers مُسلی | 412,300 | Butchers کسانئی | 127,198 |
| Carpenters ترکھان | 464,218 | Mirasi میراسی | 241,660 |

Story.2

*“You are born a ‘Sweeper’,
Stay Where You Belong”*

It was sufficient reason to force Naeem Nazir, a Christian by faith, to work as a sanitation worker because his father was working as a sanitation laborer. In 2010, 20-year-old Nazir, resident of Lahore, applied for a post of an office assistant in a government school. He was interviewed for this position, but the appointment letter that he received was of a sanitation worker. He submitted a complaint to the District Coordination Officer (DCO) who ordered the Executive District Officer (EDO) to cancel the order because it was against the law to appoint a person against the job he or she has not applied for. The EDO, however, refused and Nazir had to

appeal to the Lahore High Court (LHC) that his constitutional rights had been infringed. After five years' legal struggle, Nazir managed to make the EDO Zulfiqar Ali appear in the court and inform that there were 20 vacancies allocated for non-Muslims but all of them were only recruited sanitation workers. Justice Muhammad Qasim Khan ordered “to immediately cancel Naeem’s appointment as a sanitary worker or he would suspend all officials who were involved in the illegal appointment.” Nazir kept fighting for his rights for five years, but there are millions who abandon hope against this repressive system of injustice (Gill 2016).



Naeem Nazir

conversion to Christianity added a new attribute or characteristic of their identification; hence, making distinction and discrimination further easier. This is why a common term of abuse is "Isai-Chuhra" (Christian Chuhra). At the same time, the creation of Pakistan as a homeland of Muslims has eased out and allowed social mobility of the Chuhras who converted to Islam; hence, their name-calling Musalli has died down to a larger extent.

2-5. Denial of Caste in Pakistan

In the Universal Periodic Review in 2008, it stated that Pakistan “is a Muslim country and does not have the concept of Dalit or Scheduled Caste ... [it is] free from such kind of prejudices” (UN General Assembly 2008). The Brahmanic religious connotation in the context of non-Hindus does not exist. However, caste-based disabilities like avoidance of commensality (sharing of food) based on the notions of purity and pollution, and the perpetuation of social hierarchies continue towards certain people, especially non-Muslims and particularly Christians. The evidence collected in the research shows that the caste system, at least in sanitation labor, has survived in Pakistan.

Add one line: Only seventy-four years ago, the situation was different. There was understanding in India and Pakistan that caste based

untouchability needed to be curbed. The Indian Constitution in 1951 and Pakistan’s first Constitution in 1956 outlawed the caste system. Article No. 20 of the 1956 Constitution and Article No. 17 of the Indian Constitution read:

Untouchability is abolished and its practice in any form forbidden and shall be declared by law to be an offence.

As Pakistan is a signatory to the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination, caste practices, especially related to sanitation work, should also be looked at from the racial aspect keeping in view the developments after the United Nations World Conference on Racism held in Durban, South Africa in 2001. Pakistan, however, still denies the existence of caste in the country.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Being a Christian in Pakistan may be breathtaking in quite a different sense: it may mean cleaning up other people's urine and bowel movements for the rest of one's life ...

... because of continuing prejudice no religion on earth preaches the dignity of humanity in such a lofty strain as Hinduism, and no religion on earth treads upon the necks of the poor and the low in such a fashion as Hinduism. The Lord has shown me that religion is not in fault, but it is the Pharisees and

Sadducees in Hinduism, hypocrites, who invent all sorts of engines of tyranny in the shape of doctrines of Paramarthika and Vyavaharika.. Swami Vivekananda (12 January 1863 – 4 July 1902)

Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda - Page 1087

Swami Vivekananda (12 January 1863 – 4 July 1902)

3-1. Study Objectives, Research Questions and Scope

The study explores the current state of affairs of sanitation workers, particularly their working conditions in the context of Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) standards of Decent Work Agenda. Our primary research questions for gathering data and information were:

1. Does caste-based stigma exist in sanitation work in Lahore?
2. Is the ILO's Decent Work Agenda a priority of Lahore's sanitation

departments?

3. Do labor policies in Pakistan consider sanitation work hazardous work, especially in the light of the International Labor Organization's (ILO) Decent Work Agenda?

3-2. Scope

The study focuses on sanitation workers in Lahore employed directly or indirectly by two organizations – the Water and Sanitation Agency of Lahore (WASA) and Lahore Waste Management



*A sanitation worker
image courtesy - Dur e Ajam Wasif*

Company (LWMC). Sanitation workers can be divided into two groups: (a). Sewer cleaners are mostly employed by WASA for sewage disposal; (b). Street sweeping, garbage collection and disposal are mostly done by the LWMC. This study does not cover areas under the jurisdiction of Lahore Cantonment Board, Railway colonies and private housing societies where WASA and the LWMC do not operate. Hence, the area covered by the study will constitute roughly about 80 percent of Lahore.

3-3. Methodology of Inquiry

The study is both exploratory and descriptive in nature and uses both qualitative and quantitative data. Several reports, newspaper articles and academic writings were used to understand the subject. In-depth interviews were conducted with sanitation workers, Christian community leaders and church leaders. Later, eight focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted with sanitation workers. Each group consisted of about 8 to 10 workers. These FGDs were based on a literature review and in-depth interviews. The discussions were related to the hazardous nature of the work, occupational health and safety practices, financial and medical security and the stigma attached with the work. The FGDs also helped in building an understanding of organizational and workplace dynamics.

In the second step, questions were put in a Punjabi language survey instrument and the responses of 102 sanitation workers were collected

based on the quota sampling method (LWMC 54 responses and WASA 48 responses). The survey instrument was slightly different for WASA and the LWMC workers, depending on the nature of their work. Out of 102 respondents, 96 were Christian while six were Muslim. The LWMC divides Lahore into nine zones and 274 union councils whereas WASA divides Lahore into eight divisions and 36 subdivisions. To this end, 48 responses were collected from eight WASA subdivisions (six from each subdivision), and 54 responses were collected from nine LWMC zones (six from each union council). One WASA subdivision was randomly selected from each of the eight WASA administrative towns, and one union council was randomly selected from each of the nine LWMC zones.

Apart from the survey instrument, an extensive semi-structured questionnaire was prepared for WASA and the LWMC officials. The questionnaire varied according to the changing scope and nature of their work. Both departments generously provided their responses, except for a few questions.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Ask yourself what would happen to your own personality if you heard it said over and over again that you were lazy, a simple child of nature, expected to steal, and had inferior blood. Suppose this opinion were forced on you by the majority of your fellow citizens. And suppose nothing

that could do would change this opinion -- because you happen to have black skin.

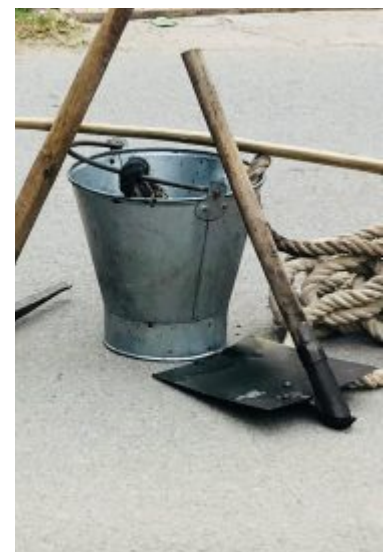
***Pioneering Social Psychologist
Gordon Allport (November 11, 1897 –
October 9, 1967)***

4-1. Sanitation in Lahore: From Colonial Rule till Today

The hottest months in Lahore are June, July and August followed by heavy monsoon rainfalls in the region. People generally speak the Punjabi language. Lahore, the capital of the province, is spread over 404 square kilometers (156 sq mi). The Ravi River flows on the northwestern side of Lahore. In this river, the entire sewage is drained through large sewage channels, traditionally called nullahs.

Lahore, historically, has been the cultural capital of the Punjab province though Delhi was the capital during the Mogul and the British eras. The British took over Punjab in 1849 and the census conducted under them in 1891 shows that Lahore was the most populous city of Punjab after Delhi (Latif 1956). The population of Lahore

in 1891 was 176,854, of which Hindus were 62,077, Sikhs 7,306, Parsees 132, Jews 14, Christians 4,697 and Muslims 102,280 (Latif 1956, 254). During this time, the British introduced the current sanitation system of transporting sewage from homes and industries through sewers. They linked sanitation with municipal institutions (Meyer 1909). London had achieved a sophisticated sewage system by 1866 under the leadership of engineer Joseph Bazalgette (Wilkes 2004) and by 1909 “few large towns” in India had started following the example “set in England” (Meyer 1909, 472). Still, in most places, the carriage of sewage with gravitational force was not developed. So, “trenching” was a commonly adopted means for removing sewage. Urban sanitation workers were “exclusively” employed by outcastes (Shingavi 2014).



The traditional tools used to open sewer lines

In 1936, the Lahore Municipal Corporation (LMC) created the Lahore Improvement Trust (LIT) to control haphazard development (Groote, et al. 1989). The LIT was replaced by the Lahore Development Authority (LDA) in 1975. Solid waste collection and disposal was the responsibility of the LMC while the Water and Sanitation Agency (WASA) was created under the framework of LDA. According to a World Bank report of 2008:

“Lahore’s economic base is broad and varied. A major industrial agglomeration with about 9,000 industrial units, it has shifted in recent decades from manufacturing to service industries. Some 42% of its workforce

is employed in finance, banking, real estate, community, cultural, and social services. The city is the country’s largest software producing center, and hosts a growing computer-assembly industry. Lahore has the second largest stock exchange in the country” (ADB 2008).

The population of the city has grown to 11,126,285. Also, the largest concentration of Pakistani Christians lives in Lahore who accounts for about 5 percent of the total population of the city. A majority of sanitation workers in Lahore are Christians (Aqeel 2018), who are labeled as “sweepers” (Bhatti 2019).

Figure. 4

Ahead of Christian festivals, people are warned not to throw garbage outside because Christian sanitation workers would be on a holiday

The two advertisements were published in 2014 and 2015 on Easter Day in Lahore. Both advertisements state that Christian sanitation workers are celebrating Easter so “citizens of Lahore are requested to kindly put their garbage in dustbins” (Rodrigues 2011, 107), which ostensibly means that on other days they have the liberty to throw their waste anywhere. Indian political scientist Valerian Rodriguez writes that societies create the “notion of the common” for minimally agreed functions in the public domain and filth in public space is related to social “structures and social relations”. He writes that public space is where domination and exclusion of groups take place. These newspaper advertisements published in Lahore give a clear message that the ‘subordinate’ group is not available due to the Easter holiday.



4-2. Institutional Landscape of Sanitation Departments in Lahore

a. Water and Sanitation Agency (WASA)

The main responsibility of WASA is to provide drinking water, maintain the sewerage system, ensure drainage of rainwater, and desilt the sewage channels (nullah) in urban areas of the city. For this entire operation, WASA received 9.8 billion rupees (roughly US\$ 63.2 million) for the fiscal year 2018-2019. The Agency has divided the urban jurisdiction in towns for efficient delivery of service into eight towns: Allama Iqbal Town, Aziz Bhatti Wagha Town, Data Gunj Buksh Town, Nishtar Town, Ravi Town, Shalimar Town, Jubilee Town, and Gulberg Town.

The total number of employees of WASA is 7,178, of which 2,240 are sanitation workers. Of these 2,240 sanitation workers, 1,609 are non-Muslim. The sewer lines in the city are 4,041 kilometers long and have 355,195 manholes. The average pipeline diameter or width is between 9 inches to 18 inches while the distance between two manholes is between 400 and 500 meters. A team of five is usually deployed to unblock a sewer line: a supervisor, a torch handler, a sewer cleaner, two for pulling the rope and one for handling the sewage-filled bucket.

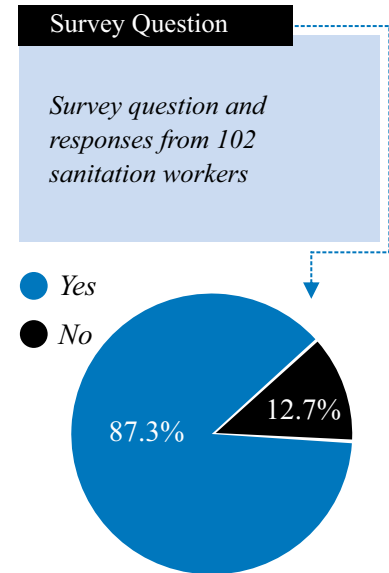
Monsoon season brings special attention to this particular department as rainwater inundates several parts of the city. During this season, WASA gets cooperation from the district administration, Lahore Municipal

Corporation, Lahore Electricity Supply Company (LESCO), Traffic Police and LWMC.

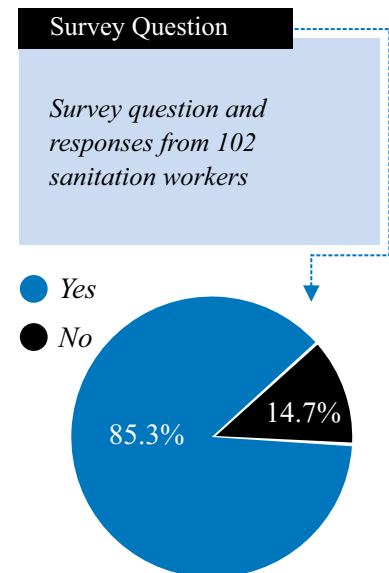
WASA, through a written reply, stated that “rainwater, dangerous factory chemicals, excreta and household waste, dangerous sharp articles like safety blades, sewing needles, broken pieces of glass and dangerous hospital waste” get into the sewerage system. It believes “solid waste” is the major cause of the blockage of sewer lines. As a precautionary measure, before monsoon, desilting of surface sewage channels/culvert (nullah) is done and winch machines are used for desilting sewer lines (this work is done through contractors).

If obstructed in a sewer line, organic waste discharges Hydrogen Sulfide (H₂S) (poisonous, corrosive, and flammable), Ammonia (which causes irritation and serious burns on the skin and in the mouth, throat, lungs, and eyes ... very high levels ammonia can even cause death”) (ATSDR 2004) and carbon monoxide (which causes headache, dizziness, weakness, vomiting, chest pain and stomach disorder) (CDC 2021). When workers are left with no choice, they go down the manhole to shove in a bamboo stick. This releases gasses in the manhole and sometimes causes sudden deaths of workers.

The Agency says it has Occupational Safety and Health (OSH) Standard Operating Protocols (SOPs) that are developed in the light of ILO and WHO standards. The personal protection equipment (PPE) includes a “mask, a harness belt, a torch, a pair of gloves, reflecting shirts, gas detectors, a safety helmet etc.” According to



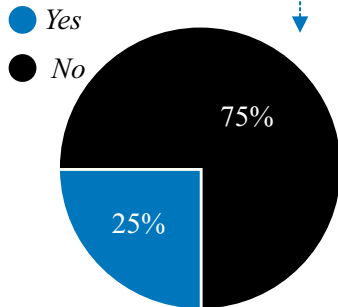
Q. Do people in general think that janitorial work is for Christians Only?



Q. Do people in general Christians “Chuhra”?

Survey Question

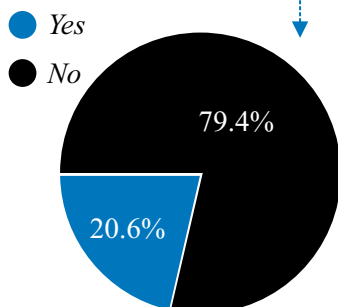
Survey question and responses from 102 sanitation workers



Q. Were you ever forced to go down a manhole even after you identified that there were poisonous gasses inside it?

Survey Question

Survey question and responses from 102 sanitation workers



Q. Do you get medical check ups regularly?

WASA, the use of the PPEs is mandatory and in case of violation there is “reprisal”. The responsibility of compliance with the SOPs lies with the Sub-Divisional Officer (SDO) and the Sub-engineer.

According to WASA, there are at least 72 WASA centers while the total quantity of PPE equipment available is: “30 Tripod-Man Winch Stands, 20 Full Body Harnesses, 36 Fresh Air Respirator Systems, 30 Dry Suits, 35 Portable Multi Gas Detectors, 25 Long Rubber Boots, 40 Water Resistant Gloves, 25 Safety Helmets, 7 Air Line Systems, 7 Single Phase Portable Compressors, and 23 Half Face Masks.”

Our survey with WASA sanitation workers shows that 83 percent of the respondents received only the traditional outdated tools of unclogging a sewer line, i.e., a rope, a bamboo stick, a bucket, a hoe (کنی), a pick (گینتی) and a pair of pajamas. In-depth interviews revealed that workers themselves bring these traditional tools to the workplace and WASA does not provide any of these. Many complain that they do not get soap for cleaning themselves up and mustard oil (used to rub on the body before going into the manhole).

WASA claims that no deaths have taken place in the last few years while 40 percent of respondents have confirmed that they have suffered a poisonous gas injury at least once during their work. Thirty-eight percent of respondents said that they had dived into a manhole filled with sewage, while at least 25 percent claimed that they were forced to go down into a manhole despite pointing out the presence of poisonous gases.

The Agency says that periodic medical checkups and screening are done, and the Punjab Directorate of Labor implements a medical inspection mechanism. However, in our survey, 80 percent of the respondents denied that there was any regular medical checkup and 69 percent said that there was no mechanism to deal with accidental and emergencies at the workplace. 79 percent said there was no regular vaccination. Some of them additionally told us that screening and vaccination were done only at the time of recruitment.

Training is done once a year for occupational safety, which was also confirmed by WASA sanitation employees. But 68 percent of respondents said that training was not useful and of cosmetic nature (probably because the equipment shown during the training is not used in everyday work).

WASA claims that a mechanism to report on-job accidents and injuries is in place. However, the department failed to provide us with a list of relevant complaints received in a year. Workers, on the other hand, told us that there was no SOP in place to handle cases of gassing or injury.

b. Lahore Waste Management Company (LWMC):

The Metropolitan Corporation Lahore’s (MCL) Services Department is responsible for solid waste collection, disposal of solid, liquid, industrial and hospital wastes, and treatment of disposal, including landfill site and recycling plants. The LDA, in March 2010, created the Lahore Waste Management Company

(LWMC) (L. G. Punjab n.d.) to deal exclusively with MCL’s issues of solid waste. Currently, the LWMC is the only agency that provides solid waste sanitation services in Lahore. It collects waste from houses and commercial areas, cleans streets and roads, and transports solid waste to disposal sites. In addition to providing these services in nine towns of Lahore, the LWMC also provides sanitation services at the Lahore Ring Road, the Metro Bus station of Lahore and Multan, and collects hospital waste. The Company collects 5,000 tons of solid waste each day which is disposed of at the Lakhodair Landfill site. The facility also has a compost plant that processes 500 tons of waste a day into organic fertilizer. For its entire operations, the LWMC received 11 billion rupees (roughly US \$71 million) for the fiscal year 2018-2019.

The Company, however, operates through two contractors (Albayrak and Ozpak). The two contracting companies have engaged private contractors (ٹھیکیدار) who retain sanitation workers on contract. Hence, the state has no responsibility towards LWMC sanitation workers. Daily wagers (called work charge) are retained through an 89-day contract so that the employing agency does not have to regularize them or consider them public employees despite working for decades for the government of Pakistan (Government of Punjab n.d.).

Out of LWMC’s 15,598 staff, sanitation workers account for 9,000 and, according to the LWMC, all of them are non-Muslim. Occupational safety and health are part of “the general policy of the LWMC” and the

Company further asserts that “some” ILO standards are being followed. As far as the OSH equipment is concerned, the Company provides a uniform, a pair of gloves, a mask, a pair of safety shoes, a safety cap, and a raincoat etc. The use of these PPEs is mandatory. The Directorate of Labor does not inspect mechanisms to ensure the safety and health of sanitation workers. The Company says that training is conducted every quarter to reduce workplace injuries and roadside accidents.

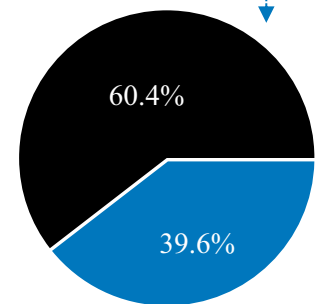
The Company says that it only has a record of major accidents and leaves of employees which means that the mechanism to record injuries does not exist. The officials say that the Company provides “compensation and medical treatment to the worker in case of work-related incident or death.” There exists no mechanism under the West Pakistan Hazardous Occupations Rules 1963. LWMC is has been established under the Companies Ordinance 1984 and hires sanitation workers “through the third-party contract agreement”. The Company meets the minimum wage of 17,500 Pakistani rupees (roughly US\$ 112) a month, which also covers Employees' Old-Age Benefits Institution (EOBI) as well as social security’s allowances.

c. LWMC and WASA Sanitation Employees Together

The following are views of both the LWMC and WASA employees. Ninety-eight percent of non-regular employees fear they can lose their job “at any time” while 53 percent of them said that they won’t get a new job. Ninety-five percent of them said that this job was their only source of

Survey Question

Survey question and responses from 102 sanitation workers



Q. Did you ever get poisoned with manhole gasses?

income. Forty-eight percent of women workers are accompanied by a male family member for help at work while 47 percent face mistreatment by strangers during work hours. Overtime is not given.

According to 79 percent of the respondents, no overtime is given to them while 82 percent said that they are not paid overtime even if they work on holidays.

About 74 percent of the respondents never enrolled in school. Ninety-nine percent believe that their work is important for the city of Lahore, but 98 percent believe that their children should get an education and opt for other occupations.

Because of the attached stigma, comparatively better off, Christians want these sanitation workers to do “decent work” and also feel that their work brings shame to the entire community. But for thousands of these Christian workers, spread across the country, quitting the occupation is not an easy option.

The responses also showed the existence of stigma in sanitation labor. Eighty-five percent of the respondents confirm that people call Christians “Chuhra” (a pejorative caste-based term meaning sweeper or janitor) and 87 percent respondents said that “people, in general, think that janitorial work is for Christians only” while 72 percent respondents say that their Muslim coworkers “believe that this work is not for them”. Generational occupation is evident as 57 percent of the respondents said their parents were also in the sanitation occupation.

The authors believe that rather than asking these workers to quit their jobs, destigmatizing and bringing dignity to this occupation as reflected in Sustainable Development Goal 8 of “Decent Work and Economic Growth” is the permanent solution to this problem, which to “promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.”



A sanitation worker is removing the lid from a manhole to work in it.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION, WAY FORWARD AND RECOMMENDATIONS

“Sanitation Workers' Prayer”
Our Henry, who art in City Hall, Hard-headed be thy name.
Thy kingdom C.O.M.E.
Our will be done,
In Memphis, as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our Dues Checkoff,
And forgive us our boycott,
As we forgive those who spray mace against us.
And lead us not into shame,
But deliver us from Loeb!
For ours is JUSTICE, JOBS, and DIGNITY,
Forever and ever. Amen.

Freedom! Recited by Reverend Malcolm Blackburn in 1968 during Memphis Sanitation Strike

5-1. Conclusion of the Study

An improvement in the working conditions and economic benefits can make this work attractive, but Pakistanis, like many other developing societies, do not invest in the sanitation sector. This results in the exploitation of economically and socially vulnerable groups, like religious minorities. There is probably no other work in public departments where employees invoke religion to shun their duties. The attitude of considering sanitation work shameful is against the Islamic principle of dignity of labor (Rehman 2010, 17). Forcing certain people into

dangerous work conditions contradicts the egalitarian spirit of Islam (Dumont 1980, 205). Article 11 of Pakistan’s Constitution prohibits forced labor which is “incompatible with human dignity”. However, Pakistan’s labor and sanitation policies do not consider the stigma and hazardous nature of sanitation nor do they consider improving the life of sanitation workers.

Religion and caste are among major “group identity” markers of exclusion. Social exclusion – enforced through stereotypes, prejudices, and stigmas – contributes to poverty and lack of



A sanitation worker
image courtesy - Dur e Ajam Wasif

access to political space. There is a confluence of caste and faith in sanitation work, which shows that highly excluded groups are forced into this occupation.

5-2. Way Forward

a. Ending Caste Discrimination

The Indian caste stigma attached to sanitation labor still survives in Pakistan. The founding father Muhammad Ali Jinnah was well aware of the deeply ingrained caste biases in Indian Muslim minds. In his inaugural speech before the constituent assembly on August 11, 1947, Mr. Jinnah identified casteism, racism and religious discrimination as causes of a hindrance to progress:

If you change your past and work together in a spirit that everyone of you, no matter to what community he belongs, no matter what relations he had with you in the past, no matter what is his colour, caste or creed, is first, second and last a citizen of this state with equal rights, privileges, and obligations, there will be no end to the progress you will make.

The report Occupational Safety and Health: Legal Framework and Statistical Trends Analysis (2010-2015) defines decent work as “essentially safe work” (International Labour Standards Unit 2016). It notes that “Occupational Safety and Health is a key element in achieving sustained decent working conditions”. The ILO definition goes much deeper:

It involves opportunities for work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men (ILO n.d.).

Without bringing this level of dignity, training and skill in sanitation labor, we cannot hope to improve achieve SDGs related to Decent Work and sanitation.

b. International Labor Standards and Sanitation Work

The International Labor Organization (ILO) includes dignity in the first strategic objective of its ‘Decent Work Agenda’ that aims to “promote standards and fundamental principles and rights at work.” The ILO stipulates that “Economic development should include the creation of jobs and working conditions in which people can work in freedom, safety and dignity” (ILO, The benefits of International Labour Standards 2014). Furthermore, the ILO includes dignity in the first strategic objective of its ‘Decent Work Agenda’ that aims to “promote standards and fundamental principles and rights at work.” The ILO stipulates that “Economic development should include the creation of jobs and working conditions in which people can work in freedom, safety and dignity” (ILO, The benefits of International Labour Standards 2014).



A sanitation worker is looking outside of the manhole to mark his attendance through a geo-tagging monitoring picture

This is in line with UDHR Article 23(1) which says “Everyone has the right to work, to free choice of employment, to just and favorable conditions of work and to protection against unemployment.”

Pakistan has not ratified ILO Convention no. 155 which demands that the state party “formulate, implement and periodically review a coherent national policy on occupational safety, occupational health and the working environment.” The ILO Convention no. 187 states that the only formulation of a policy is not enough but there is a need to “implement, monitor, evaluate and periodically review” the national program “on occupational safety and health in consultation with the most representative organizations of employers and workers.” Pakistan has not ratified this convention either. ILO Recommendation no. 164 asks governments that they require the “employer” “to verify the implementation of applicable standards on occupational safety and health regularly, for instance by environmental monitoring, and to undertake systematic safety audits from time to time.” It further requires that “Employers should be required to keep such records relevant to occupational safety and health and the working environment as are considered necessary by the competent authority or authorities; these might include records of all notifiable occupational accidents and injuries to health which arise in the course of or in connection with work”. The ILO Recommendation no. 197 requires that data be “regularly” updated on “the existing situation on occupational safety and health and the progress

made towards achieving a safe and healthy working environment.” However, no such data has been recorded of sanitation workers in Pakistan.

To change these negative aspects related to sanitation labor, the following are the recommendations:

5-3. Recommendations

1. Caste practices like name-calling (Chuhra, Bhangi) should be banned and the practice of recording caste in legal and revenue documents be abolished.
2. The ILO’s Decent Work Agenda should be implemented into the sanitation industry:
 - a. Ensure provision and use of safety equipment during work
 - b. Reporting mechanism of injury and accident be introduced
 - c. Health insurance and benefits and regular medical check be made mandatory
3. The National Sanitation Policy 2006 be revisited and sanitation workers be taken into consideration as major stakeholders.
4. National and provincial labor policies should include sanitation workers among vulnerable groups. Sanitation work should be considered hazardous in policy frameworks.



*A sanitation worker
image courtesy - Dur e Ajam Wasif*

5. Christian sanitation workers should be allowed job promotion as supervisors rather than kept in the same position for decades.
6. Sanitation work currently has characteristics of the informal sector. It should be brought into the formal sector.
7. Enforcement of laws regarding the throwing of garbage in drains should be made operational, and the LWMC should be made responsible for garbage removal from drains.

unskilled sanitation workers often face social stigma and discrimination. This is especially true when sanitation is linked to a caste-based structure and often allocated to castes perceived to be lower in the caste hierarchy.

5. WASA specifically seeks enforcement of laws regarding the throwing of garbage in drains.
6. WASA has demanded that LWMC be made operational for garbage removal from drains.
7. LWMC proposes the formulation of the All Punjab Municipal Solid Waste Management Act to improve the sanitation system of Lahore.

5-4. Recommendations by WASA and LWMC to Improve Sanitation Work

1. WASA and LWMC both seek financial support from provincial and local governments to improve sanitation and conditions of sanitation workers in Lahore.
2. WASA believes the government should launch a comprehensive mass awareness program for a better future and appreciation of sanitation workers. There is also a dire need for the development of the solid waste management act which must also cover the protection of labor rights at their workplace.
3. LWMC thinks that bringing dignity to sanitary workers at the workplace is important because this will enhance their interest in work.
4. WASA believes that low-grade,

8. WASA proposes more financial investment for occupational health and safety but LWMC says that a dedicated department should be established for the purpose.
9. WASA believes it can deliver more efficiently if it is given more autonomy in decision-making, especially in financial matters.
10. LWMC recommends that its legal status should be changed to that of an Authority and it should be tasked with making a targeted revenue generation plan to achieve sustainable development goals.

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Asif Aqeel is a prominent journalist, researcher and writer, and a vocal member of Pakistan's Christian community. His area of work is “Marginality & Exclusion” with a focus on religious minorities. Asif holds degrees in MSc Sociology, and MA in Public Policy & Governance. His MA thesis was “Post-Partition Rural to Urban Mass Migration and Subsequent Illegal Settlements of Punjabi Christians and their Adoption of the Sweeping Occupation in Pakistan.” Asif has worked with the Daily Times, Pakistan Today, and Express 24/7 and several non-government organizations. He has written for Global Village Space, Dawn, The Friday Times, The News on Sunday, World Watch Monitor and Christianity Today.

Mary Gill is a politician, a human rights lawyer, and an activist. She is the founder of Pakistan's first advocacy campaign, Sweepers Are Superheroes, which aims to raise awareness of sewer and waste workers' dignity, safety, and social protection. For her tireless work for sanitation workers through this campaign, she was awarded Sweden's prestigious Anna Lindh Prize 2020 on the nomination of WaterAid Sweden. She has recently been nominated as Member Global Advisory Committee on Health, Safety and Dignity of Workers in Sanitation, under the Initiative for Sanitation Workers, a joint project of ILO, WHO, World Bank, WaterAid, and SNV. Her main areas of interest are; social inclusion of marginalized minorities, issues of minority women and girls, improving socio-economic and working conditions of vulnerable working classes, and mainstreaming religious minorities in political and parliamentary processes.



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