

# Digitally Documenting Caste: Sanitation Work and Social Hierarchy in ‘*Son of a Sweeper*’

Dr. Nitin Dhaktode

*Assistant Professor, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai*

**Abstract**—Visual ethnography documented digitally serves as a powerful tool for raising awareness among participants regarding social problems. The documentary "Son of a Sweeper" starkly depicts the harsh realities faced by sanitation workers in India, highlighting the ongoing violation of their fundamental human rights. It reveals the entrenched challenges that these workers have endured for centuries, which persist even amidst significant global advancements. The responses of the participants at the documentary in New Jersey, USA, emerged as crucial data sources, complemented by visual elements and supplementary information from Kumar. This paper offers a comparative perspective from grassroots perspectives through a visual examination of the documentary, Kumar's responses, and the audience's diverse international viewpoints, emphasizing the need for empathy and sensitivity in addressing these issues. The thematic analysis further investigates potential community-based interventions that consider the intersections of race and caste.

**Key Words** — Movement, Ethnography, America, Caste, Race, Community

## I. INTRODUCTION

“I believe we have to break the cycle of manual scavenger occupations where generations have been in the same profession with multiple problems. To break that cycle, we need to provide education to the children of those who are in manual scavenging occupations. I have started this movement to work at the grassroots with children, providing them hope they can become doctors, engineers, and entrepreneurs who can travel abroad and will not get into a cleaning occupation,” was the response of Vimal Kumar to the post-screening question of what we should do to uplift the people in the manual scavenger occupation? Kumar earned his Ph.D. from the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, India, and he is the son of sweepers, known for the manual scavenger movement that commenced in 2009 in India. His insights shed light on the community-driven sustainable intervention strategies and methodologies he implemented to work towards

the elimination of manual scavenging practices in the country. Although this endeavour may require several years to fully realise its objectives, it represents a compelling and promising start initiated by his dedicated team.

The documentary titled ‘Son of Sweeper’ was screened based on Kumar’s life and work for the community, made by Lisa Mills in 2020. The screening of this documentary was organised by Dr. Ambedkar International Mission (AIM) in New Jersey, United States of America (USA). The AIM USA was Founded 2003 under the leadership of the late Raju Kamble to work on the philosophy of Dr. Ambedkar and “*pay back to society*”. The screening event attracted Ambedkarite research scholars, professionals, and practitioners based in the United States. The twenty-eight-minute documentary provided a profound exploration of the harrowing circumstances and hardships faced by sanitation workers, specifically manual scavengers, while also highlighting the pervasive human rights violations they endure in their daily lives.

The paper is based on the documentary, participants, responses, questions on the problem of sanitation workers in India, and responses from Kumar. The paper explores key questions such as 1) Understanding the sanitation worker community and its historical socio-cultural origins and practices through visuals of documentaries and literature 2) The status of sanitation workers, their daily lives, deaths, and key challenges they face in the occupation 3) What are the probable ways and solutions to eradicate this problem sustainably?

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In the context of visual ethnography, the author employed a descriptive research framework to gather data through documentary visuals, complemented by qualitative feedback from the leader of the MSC and attendees of the documentary screening held in New

Jersey, USA. The data collection methods included focus group discussions involving 30 participants and participatory observation conducted by the researcher. Among the 30 participants, half actively engaged in discussions, posing questions that were addressed by the MSC leader. The open-ended responses were meticulously recorded and subsequently analysed according to key themes, as detailed in the analysis section of the paper. The participants represented a wide array of professional fields, including academic research, engineering, management, pharmaceuticals, and social sciences, with a demographic composition of males and females. Additionally, the documentary served as a vital secondary data source, alongside other relevant literature and reports pertaining to the subject matter.

#### Sanitation workers and their status

There are different types of sanitation work that are categorised into nine broad categories based on the perceived value of the work. These categories include cleaning sewers, cleaning latrines, fecal sludge handling, railway track cleaning, working in waste treatment plants, community and public toilet cleaning, school toilet cleaning, sweeping and drain cleaning, and domestic work. Sanitation work is an occupation in India associated with a historically oppressed caste belonging to the Scheduled Caste (SC) category, politically known as Dalits in India. It is one of the most inhumane and hazardous occupations, taking millions of lives. The origin of this caste-based occupation is found in the *Chaturvarna* hierarchical social order. Dr Ambedkar (2004) in his first paper (1916), titled “Caste in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis, and Development,” explains the *Chaturvarna* social order with everyday practising features of the caste in India. The *Chaturvarna* system defined four *Varnas* Brahmin, *Kshatriya*, *Vaisya*, and *Shudra*. The fifth *Varna*, which was not considered a *Varna* was the ex-untouchables who were assigned unclean jobs and did not give space in the *Chaturvarna* system; therefore, they were called *Ati-Shudra* or outcastes. Dr. Ambedkar called them the depressed classes until 1935.

The *Manusmriti* is a traditional orthodox Hindu religious law book that vanished with Article 13 (1) of the Indian Constitution, which says “all laws in force in the territory of India immediately before the commencement of this Constitution, in so far as they are inconsistent with the provisions of this Part, shall,

to the extent of such inconsistency, be void”. *Manusmriti* defines the *Chaturvarna* system and assigns occupations such as *Brahmin's* role would be priests and teachers, *Kshetriay* known as warriors and rule the state, *Viashya* do business, *Shudras* provide services to the other three *Varna*, and *Ati-shudra* are given uncleaned jobs. Based on the occupational association, untouchability was practised. Dr. Ambedkar argues that caste comes with the birth of humans, and occupation is automatically assigned as per the caste. It is sustained with restrictions of occupational mobility, interdining, restriction of exogamy and practising endogamy, and practising purity and impurity, which means practising untouchability with the members of a caste who are below others, especially with *Shudra* and *Atishudra*. Gail Omvedt (1982) summarises it with restrictions on *roti-beti*.

Among the sanitation workers, a few castes are engaged in the sweeping occupation, some in drainage cleaning, and a few in scavenging. Within the *Ati-Shudra* community, the caste at the bottom within SCs were engaged in manual scavenging occupations, and this continues even today, with which every other caste practices untouchability, even though untouchability is abolished through Article 17 of the Indian Constitution. Such discriminatory practices were based on the entrenched perception that these occupations were *polluting* – menial in the societal sense, and the communities have been treated as *untouchables* in Indian society (Beck & Darokar, 2005).

The deaths of sanitation workers especially the drainage cleaning and manual scavengers have been researched, discussed, and debated on multiple platforms. Workers are exposed to toxic materials, gasses, and fumes emanating from the waste (Cointreau, 2006, Kadam et al, 2023). Mortality among workers is common, wherein 2,614 conservancy workers in Mumbai corporation, India, lost their lives between 2004 and 2013, averaging 261 worker deaths a year (Makne, 2014). Surprisingly, the union government told Lok Sabha that no person had died from manual scavenging in the country in the last three years (2019 to 2022). It added that a total of 233 people had died “due to accidents while undertaking hazardous cleaning of sewer and septic tanks” in this time period (The Hindu News). Shaileshkumar Darokar (2018) faculty member of TISS Mumbai and one of the leading researchers on

sanitation workers highlights multiple death cases and inhuman recordings of Padma Shri Sudharak Olwe captured a hard-hitting reality of the daily lives of about 38,000 conservancy workers employed in Mumbai in his photo documentation project “In Search of Dignity and Justice—The Untold Story of Conservancy Workers (2018). As part of the research project of TISS total of 39,729 workers from the Brumumbai Municipal Corporation (BMC) were surveyed, of which 82 percent (32,588) were interviewed, and 18 percent (7,141) were not interviewed and came up with the findings. The field insights suggest workers do their jobs without safety equipment and in poor conditions, especially in the contractual system.

Maharashtra is known for the Dalit and anti-caste movements due to the strong influence of Mahatma Phule, Chhatrapati Shahu Maharaj, and Dr Ambedkar, in recent times. In this state, especially in Mumbai, this was the ground reality of Dalits in sanitation work. The situation became worse in the conservative caste-practicing state, as Kumar highlights in his doctoral thesis submitted in TISS Mumbai in 2022. As Kumar argues, for the manual scavengers, there is a struggle with the upper caste and within the lower caste too. Different treatments has been given by both the caste group people due to their unclean occupation. Kumar started the first centre of the MSC in 2009 and since been working for the community (Kumar, 2014).

Article 3 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR), established by the United Nations, asserts that every individual is entitled to life, freedom, and personal security. The fatalities among sanitation workers indicate a significant violation of this essential fundamental right in India. Further, Article 23 (3) says, “Everyone who works has the right to just and favourable remuneration, ensuring for himself and his family an existence worthy of human dignity, and supplemented, if necessary, by other means of social protection” (ibid). However, they have been treated with discrimination based on their social and occupational identities. Kumar says, “Sanitation work is the only profession where salaries are decreasing due to the contract labour system” (ibid). The nature of the work took away the dignity and respect of the workers in this occupation. Thus, the violation of human rights becomes a common phenomenon in the lives of sanitation workers.

The introduction of the *Swatch Bharat Abhiyan* by the Bhartiya Janta Party (BJP) led National Democratic Alliance (NDA) government and the popular slogan of toilets are more important than the temple by the Prime Minister has not changed the lives of the sanitation workers (Dhaktode, 2014; Dhrokar, 2018). The savage system and technology adopted by the various nations have not yet reached India to make lives easy for sanitation workers. In the USA, a large number of sanitation workers have been protected with safety equipment. Therefore, Prof. Vivek Kumar (2014) raises the question of “whose cleanliness?” the government is talking about when there is nothing constructive for the sanitation workers.

#### Son of a Sweeper: Digital Documentation and Visual Analysis

The documentary was screened at the residence of one of the Board of Directors of AIM. With the communitarian approach and payback to society philosophy, the host made every arrangement for the participants. Before screening the documentary, Kumar gave a brief introduction to the documentary. It was directed by Lisa Millsd (2021), who is a leading academician at the University of Central Florida, USA, along with her team. The documentary shows that it was shot in Haryana, Punjab, Assam, Delhi, Washington, and Mumbai, Maharashtra, where Vimal travels for his work, and MSC Centres are located.

The documentary opens by showcasing the inaugural centre of the MSC, where Kumar illustrates the restoration of an ageing room intended for community use. In the subsequent scene, a marriage rally is depicted, highlighting the traditions associated with Hindu marriage culture. Kumar elaborates on the Hindu Chaturvarna caste system, while the visuals transition to a railway track, where a man is seen manually collecting waste in a bucket. He provides insight into the grim reality of how individuals are tasked with cleaning railway tracks. Kumar emphasises the contradiction that exists “despite the constitutional prohibition against manual scavenging, noting that this practice persists within the government sector”. He highlights the lack of safety measures in this dehumanising work, revealing that an alarming 61 manual scavengers lose their lives each day due to the dangers associated with this occupation, and he expresses a fervent desire to eradicate this practice.

The documentary offers an insightful exploration into the lives of Kumar and the sanitation community, presenting vivid visuals that depict the environment in which they operate. It illustrates the daily workings of the sanitation workers and sheds light on the living conditions of their families within the locality. The narrative guides the audience from the challenges faced by these workers to the proactive solutions introduced by Vimal, who has established centres aimed at providing library resources and leadership training for both the sanitation workers and their children, thereby fostering empowerment and community development.

The last part of the documentary shows how Vimal reached America for the one-year leadership program and the issues faced by the sanitation worker community during the COVID-19 pandemic after his return to India. To support the community, they run the “Jay Bhim Kitchen” and feed the needy during the pandemic. Akhup and Kumar's (2022) research paper on community-based intervention during COVID-19 argues the “pandemic exposed the social vulnerabilities and the widening caste, class, and gender inequalities across the identified sweeper colonies.” The cases they refer to in the cited paper and show in the documentary provide depth to the vulnerabilities and sufferings of the community during a pandemic. Considering the need for time, MSC engaged with issues. Kumar narrates his life and how he faced multiple hurdles to get a quality education and reach America for a year of leadership program he completed in 2020. He wanted to become a pilot but could not due to his parents' occupation; he wanted to play cricket but untouchability restricted him from accessing it; and it was his education that brought him to the position where it stands today. He mentioned the vision of the movement and the path to achieving it.

#### Thematic Analysis of Discussion

Following the screening of the documentary, the ensuing discussion offered an enriched perspective on the global Ambedkarite movement and the vision articulated by Kumar. The host initiated the dialogue, setting the stage for an engaging exchange of ideas. Kumar made a succinct observation, stating, “This documentary captures only a few snapshots of our lives and the movements we represent. Due to time constraints, not everything could be included. I welcome your inquiries.” The audience responded with a variety of questions and comments, reflecting

their compassion for the sanitation workers and the challenges they face in their daily lives. Several key themes emerged during the discussion, highlighting the pressing issues and experiences of this community.

#### Economic dependency

The community of sanitation workers is intrinsically linked to their profession, largely due to the economic advantages that have fostered a generational reliance on this line of work. Despite the challenges posed by a contractual employment system that has led to declining wages, many individuals remain within the same occupational sphere. According to the BMC, all positions are officially designated for Dalits, yet the lack of adequate safety measures and the prevailing social stigma deter individuals from other castes from pursuing this profession. Consequently, Dalits have predominantly filled these roles through various means. In a densely populated metropolitan area like Mumbai, where housing is scarce and the demand for sanitation workers is high, the BMC provides housing for these workers. Upon retirement or death of an employee, the housing is reclaimed by the BMC, prompting the next generation to step into the same occupation to maintain their residence.

A significant topic of discussion revolves around the proposition of encouraging sanitation workers to abandon their current profession. If such a course of action is deemed necessary, it raises the question of what viable alternatives can be offered. A senior member of the Ambedkar International Mission (AIM) highlighted that Dr. B.R. Ambedkar had previously urged Dalits in Maharashtra to relinquish their traditional caste-based occupations, known as *Vatandari*, and migrate to urban areas. Many families, particularly those belonging to the Mahar caste, followed this guidance and relocated to cities, which has led to significant changes in their socio-economic status, including the case of the speaker who now resides in the United States. Kumar emphasised the organisation's commitment to working with the children and younger family members of sanitation workers, providing them with leadership training to explore diverse career paths. While it may be challenging to persuade the current generation to leave their occupation, the focus is on empowering the next generation to pursue alternatives, thereby addressing the economic dependency on sanitation work and fostering a pathway toward greater economic independence.

### Social Aspect and Analysis

The challenges faced by sanitation workers are deeply entrenched in the historical caste system, prompting the need for a viable and enduring solution to this issue. Vimal articulates his stance against caste-based occupations, particularly manual scavenging, asserting that rather than merely supporting scavengers, efforts should focus on dismantling the cycle of occupational inheritance. He emphasises the importance of targeting the younger generation, positing that education serves as the most effective means of achieving this goal. To this end, initiatives have been launched across various states, aimed at fostering community-based interventions.

Despite these initiatives, scepticism persists among respondents regarding the effectiveness of such sustainable solutions. The concern arises whether individuals, even when educated and financially independent, will possess the awareness necessary to liberate themselves from the shackles of caste-based oppression. While economic empowerment may be achieved, individuals entrenched in the hierarchical caste system might still engage in practices associated with lower castes. This underscores the necessity for sustainable community-level interventions to address the root of the problem. Investment in community development is futile if it does not provide a clear and sustainable pathway for individuals to escape these entrenched issues, as they risk reverting to previous conditions. Kumar highlights that Buddhism offers a potential means of liberation from this religious entrapment, sharing insights from grassroots experiences. He notes that the prevailing social dynamics often inhibit open discussions about Buddhism or Dr. Ambedkar, revealing a significant divide among Dalit caste groups. A limited number of educated individuals are familiar with Dr. Ambedkar's teachings and Buddhist principles, indicating that a strategic approach is essential. While introducing these concepts is crucial, it must be done cautiously to avoid alienating the community, which may perceive such efforts as attempts at conversion rather than genuine support for their liberation. Other participants concur with Kumar's observations, emphasising the need for more effective strategies in this regard.

### Political aspect and analysis

A significant aspect of the discussion revolved around the absence of empirical data to support

advocacy efforts, alongside the necessity for the state to assume responsibility for its actions. Kumar and other participants articulated their perspectives on this matter. Initially, it was emphasised that manual scavenging is an occupation that has been constitutionally prohibited. Furthermore, various commissions, such as the National Commission for Scheduled Castes and the National Commission for Safai Karamcharis (NCSK), have emerged; however, these bodies have largely functioned as governmental entities with minimal impact on addressing critical issues like the provision of safety equipment, the prevention of fatalities, and the rehabilitation of affected families. There exists a pressing need to exert political pressure on both the government and constitutional institutions to formulate and implement effective policies that ensure transparency and accountability, thereby safeguarding the rights of sanitation workers and empowering their communities. The recent data presented in the Lok Sabha, which denied the occurrence of deaths among manual scavengers, further captured the attention of participants, prompting Vimal to advocate for a broader political mobilisation to hold the government accountable for these issues.

Drawing from grassroots experiences, Kumar mentioned that "The mobilisation of sanitation workers within the community is hindered by caste-related issues. Among Dalits, sanitation workers and manual scavengers receive insufficient attention and support from Dalit political parties. The Arya Samaj conversion movement primarily attracted individuals from the Valmiki and Bhangi castes, some of whom converted and began wearing the *Jeneu*, a Hindu religious thread. Despite their continued low status in the caste hierarchy, they derive a sense of satisfaction and cultural identity from wearing the *Jeneu*. Political mobilisation presents various challenges, and a significant factor contributing to the persistence of sanitation workers in this profession is the inadequate mobilisation efforts on their behalf."

In summary, the discussion highlighted the significance of community-based interventions while equally emphasising the necessity of policy-level advocacy for broader impact. The state must fulfil its obligation to safeguard citizens and uphold their fundamental human rights as enshrined in the Indian Constitution. Engaging in ground-level research and utilising data for advocacy at governmental and judicial levels will facilitate macro-level

interventions that hold states accountable for their responsibilities. Additionally, individuals like Vimal have implemented strategies to address these issues directly in the field. Consequently, collaborative efforts among community members to tackle the challenges faced by sanitation workers in India have emerged as a unified objective.

### III. CONCLUSION

Isabel Wilkerson (2020) argues that Race is a caste in the United States (US) with similar features in everyday practice as caste does in South Asia, especially in India. Cobb and Remnick (2021) emphasise various ways in practice to discriminate based on racial identity in the US. Sanitation workers are one of the occupations that found similar patterns of social engagement in the US and India. The members of the oppressed caste and Blacks (Afro-Americans) have been facing exclusion for ages, rooted in imposed social slavery in India and American society. The caste and racial identity became a key hurdle for their progress and development historically for these two communities in their respective countries. The Black population in the USA is around 13.06 per cent whereas the SCs are around 16 per cent in India. If we see the sanitation workers in the USA amongst the total workers, whites are (56 percent), followed by Hispanics or Latinos (21.1 per cent), Black or African Americans (12.2 percent) and Asians (4.9 percent). Whereas it is nearly one hundred per cent of Dalits in India. In proportion to the total population, the Blacks' number is also significant in the sanitation work. The only difference we see in America is that sanitation workers are treated with dignity, considering a profession as others without practising untouchability, whereas sanitation workers in India are humiliated and face untouchability (Kumar, 2014). A study conducted by Dalberg Associates in 2018 estimated five million sanitation workers in various urban locations across India whereas America has just 55,512.

The relatively low number of sanitation workers in the USA can be attributed to its advanced sanitation infrastructure, technological advancements, and effective waste management safety equipment. In contrast, sanitation workers in India face significantly harsher conditions due to inadequate social security, insufficient safety gear, and a lack of proper infrastructure for waste collection. The health and

death issues affecting the scavenging community are pressing matters that require urgent government intervention through sustainable policy measures. It is essential to address both community-level needs and policy reforms to ensure that workers receive their fundamental rights and that future generations are not compelled to enter this degrading profession. The international community expresses solidarity and concern regarding the challenges faced by sanitation workers in India, advocating for policy changes through research and community engagement. True empowerment for sanitation workers will only be achieved when they can freely choose their occupations, free from the constraints of caste-based discrimination.

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