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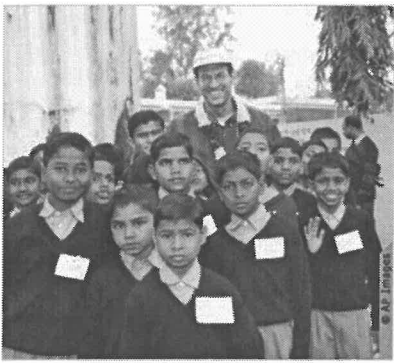
## PUBLICATIONS

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### The Most Indecent Work

#### Unsanitary occupation called disgraceful

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A group of young Dalit boys pose with Habitat for Humanity International CEO Jonathan Reckford. As members of India's lowest caste, half of the group may die before age 12.

by Harriette Naa Lamiley Bentil and Dick de Jong

"Nothing is hopeless, we must hope for everything."

*Euripides*

*Greek philosopher*

*b.480 B.C. -d.406 B.C.*

Seventeen years later after their country passed a law making the health-threatening occupation illegal, some 1.3 million Indians still earn a living by performing the degrading and dangerous job of cleaning up human excrement by hand. Manual scavenging entails cleaning

latrines and carcasses of humans and animals with bare hands. The United Nations Commission on Human Rights has described it as the most indecent form of work.

Without any protective clothing — such as boots, masks or gloves — manual scavengers clean toilets and clogged sewer lines. They collect fecal matter in baskets lined with leaves, and many are left sick.

About 80 percent of these workers are women, and the majority are Dalits, a collection of communities that were denied any caste status in India's traditional social hierarchy. They are paid roughly 900 rupees (\$19.32 USD) a month and can afford only cheap drugs to treat their illnesses.

According to WaterAid America, a U.S.-based nongovernmental organization (NGO), India's teeming cities lack the infrastructure for sewage removal, but a recent report from the organization points to caste prejudice as the reason that little progress has been made in stopping manual scavenging.

## **Like a Priest Predestined to Preach**

In modern India, manual scavengers are still cleaning the waste of people who “discriminate against and look down on the scavengers,” according to Wilson Bezwada, founder of a program aimed at ending the practice. Bezwada, who comes from a family who worked as scavengers, started Safai Karmachari Andolan, a national campaign aimed at challenging the links between caste and occupation. “Through eradicating manual scavenging,” he says, “we will break the link imposed by the caste system between birth and dehumanizing occupations. It is a matter of human dignity.”

His movement is working in 18 Indian states. “No human being should carry someone else’s shit,” Bezwada said at the 2009 Stockholm Water Forum.

Since 1986, the movement has engaged in protracted struggles. One is to change the mindset of scavengers, many of whom believe that, in the words of Bezwada, “like a priest who is predestined to preach, we are predestined to do this work.”

But for most of the scavengers, the work is hideous. “We have not yet told our children what we do. They won’t understand; there is no pride in it,” a female scavenger said.

In September 2008, women from scavenging communities in Madhya Pradesh and Gujarat states met with the National Human Rights Commission in Delhi to demand dignity for their labor. They asked for a revision of existing laws and policies to counter manual scavenging.

## **Lack of Government Support**

Bezwada believes the Indian government has not demonstrated enough commitment to liberating those who perform a job that does not legally exist.

Ashif Shaikh of Rashtriya Garima Abhiyan, an NGO working with scavenger communities, says that existing surveys of the practice have provided an incorrect and misleading picture of the numbers of people involved, and that most states have underreported them.

But the situation is not all gloomy. Bezwada said Safai Karmachari Andolan has helped a number of manual scavengers obtain alternative livelihoods, and the collective efforts of NGOs in the country have reduced the number of scavengers from 2 million to 1.3 million.

Bezwada has become an icon of hope for the hopeless as he strives to create alternatives for manual scavengers. For him, the struggle will not end until every single person is liberated from working as a scavenger. “This is not a fight for power, wealth nor fame, but for human dignity and respect,” he said.

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