

Living Dirty Life While Keeping Roads Clean: A Case Study on the Street Cleaners of Dhaka City

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Abstract: *Every day when the city dwellers fall asleep after their day's work, a special segment of people starts their work. Be it a hot, humid day, a chilling winter, or the monsoon, these people have got no respite. They are the street cleaners who—in addition to the common problems in the avenues of right to work, right at work, and right through work facing the labor force in general—are subject to some special problems such as recruitment of labor from other religions specially from the Muslims¹, restricted access to general civic amenities etc. Conventional wisdom suggests that the street cleaners generally live a super-inhuman life. The study deals with the rights and standard provisions of exclusively the street cleaners in the light of right to work, right at work, and right through work. Primary data were collected from the Mirpur area of the city of Dhaka. The study is unique in that it brings about new insights on the state of a very special segment of Bangladesh's working poor.*

Key Words: *Street Cleaners, Logistics & Infrastructural Capacity, Dhaka City Corporation, Social Stigma, Work Rights.*

I. Introduction

With rapid urbanization, Dhaka—the capital city of Bangladesh—has a population of nearly 6.8 million in its total area of roughly 816 square kilometers as of 2007, although the true figure of population of the city is believed to be almost double the official figure. The 2012 edition of Demographia World Urban Areas has put that figure at 15.4 million (Demographia World Urban Areas, 2012). The huge population density has been taking its toll on the city's limited natural and infrastructural resources and the pressures are showing in various ways such as ubiquitous display of wastes and garbage in the city streets. In its Best Cities Ranking and Report, The Economist Intelligence Unit (2012), has rated Dhaka as the most unlivable city amongst the 140 cities in the world.

Among the people who work to keep the city clean are the street cleaners. There are as many as four types of labors who together complete the gigantic task of keeping the unplanned megacity Dhaka clean. A group of labors collect garbage from individual houses and store them in local, community level dustbins. Another group of labors sweep the city streets and store the trashes into specific portable bins put by the DCC. There is another group of labors who collect garbage from the local, community level bins and store them into regional garbage points developed by the DCC. This category of labors separate different types of trashes such as plastic wastes, aluminum items, medical wastes etc. before finally leaving the absolute garbage to the regional bins. The last type of labors collect garbage from the regional garbage points and dump them into the two dumping stations of the DCC. This study covers the second type of labors i.e. the street cleaners.

In a bid to partially explore the state of Bangladesh's working poor, this paper puts light on the condition of the street cleaners of Dhaka city. Taking the street cleaners as the subject of study, this paper examines the broad spectrum of labor rights from three vantage points: rights to work, rights at work, and rights through work.

1.1 Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. A structured questionnaire has been used to collect information from the street cleaners through face-to-face interview. Street cleaners of Begum Rokeya Sarani (to be exact, from number 10 circle of Mirpur to Agargaon intersection) and the link road from Agargaon intersection to the Office of the Prime Minister have been covered under the study. In total 27 cleaners have been appointed by the DCC for the area covered under the study, and of them 22 cleaners have been personally interviewed, others could not be reached. Two Focus Group Discussions, each comprising 10 participants, were also conducted. Besides 5 individuals (2 DCC officers, 2 street-cleaners' leaders, and 1 NGO activist) have been interviewed as Key Informants. Outcomes of the FGDs and KIIs have helped to cross-check the correctness of the findings of the face-to-face interviews. Along with the findings of face-to-face interviews, FGDs, and KIIs, this paper contains two Case Studies as well.

1.2 Logistics & Infrastructural Capacity of Dhaka City Corporation

In the 90 wards under DCC there are in total 8000 cleaners approximately. Out of the 22 first class posts 21 are lying vacant along with 130 other posts. In addition, most cleaners work only 3 to 4 hours although their ideal working time is 8 hours a day. According to the DCC sources, the monthly budget for cleaners' wages and fuel cost of cleaning vans is BDT 70 million. The waste management program of 7 wards of DCC has been dormant for the last 9 years. Out of the total 90 wards, 8 have given the responsibility of waste management to private bodies through lease contract. Meanwhile, in a

¹ Traditionally, the work of cleaning streets, septic tanks, sewerage lines etc. had been restricted for only the lower caste Hindus.

drive against irregularities in different wards of DCC, several instances of gross irregularities, corruption and abuse of power were reported against cleaners and concerned officials. It is alleged that DCC cleaners collect their salary without reporting to work by paying underhand commission to their respective duty officers.

DCC has 224 trucks, 415 demountable containers, 3000 manual carts, and 2200 dustbins to handle its waste management drives. It has two dumping depots—one in Matuail and the other in Baliapur of Amin Bazar in Savar. Allegedly the trucks make claims of 3 to 4 trips but actually make only 2 trips per day. It is also alleged that about 200 DCC cleaners have been working in other organizations or in other government units although they draw their salaries under the waste management budget. In addition, around 500 cleaners are reported absent on a daily basis. This, in turn, poses pressure on the DCC's capacity of keeping the city clean and livable.

It has been reported that DCC cleaners are not regular in cleaning the city streets daily. In the field survey conducted for the study this claim has been proved to be true. The drains are seldom cleaned and maintained and they often get clogged during rainy seasons when uncollected garbage gets swept to choke them. The clogged drains are then fixed by private initiative although DCC has designated funds for the purpose. But the DCC officials do not agree with these claims. One officer said:

“If cleaners were not regular then the city would have been unlivable by now. We work under a great deal of challenges and limitations. We need at least 20,000 cleaners for this mega city but we are coping with only 7,500. We should have at least 800 covered vans for waste disposal but we are managing with only 250, out of which 30 to 35 remain out of order most of the time.”²

II. Types of Cleaners and their Jobs

Street cleaners are of two types: the first group, comprised mainly of women, sweeps the streets with traditional brooms and accumulates the dirt and dusts, which are then collected with manual trolleys by a second group who puts the garbage into trucks. The truck drivers take the garbage to the regional depots.

III. Areas of Problems facing the Street Cleaners – General and Specific Problems

The street cleaners are subject to hordes of problems which need to be addressed in order to ensure a better work life for this segment of formal working poor. Problems facing the street cleaners could be categorized into two types: general problems and special problems.

3.1 General Problems

Those problems that apply to all the street cleaners irrespective of sex, age, and other attributes can be termed as general problems. These include:

a) Limited employment opportunity

Traditionally, the job of street cleaning was reserved for the lower caste Hindus. But now this is open to workers of all religions. This has been a serious threat to the livelihoods of the lower caste Hindus because they are not entitled to participate in the formal labor force.

b) Bad living condition

Street cleaners of the study area live in a precarious condition at Shialbari in section-6 of Mirpur. There are two five storied buildings which are so dilapidated that these may break down any time. One building is east-faced and expands from North to South. The second building is north-faced and expands from East to West. In front of the two buildings there is an open space in where there are five toilets. In each floor there are twenty rooms. As many as ten families live in each floor each entitled with two rooms. At least three generations live together at a time. There is a water tank atop every building which are filled with water twice in a day. The inhabitants of these two buildings are subject to severe scarcity of water and electricity.

c) Social stigma

It has been an irony that although the city people have to depend on the service of the street cleaners, the general society does not allow them to participate in common social events. General people do not behave with them in a friendly manner. Street cleaners cannot enjoy the common civic amenities. They are hated by all.

3.2 Specific Problems

Those problems that apply exclusively to the street cleaners can be termed as specific problems. At the family level, for example, women workers have to work outside home at the streets as well as performing the domestic works almost single-handedly. Males do not take part in the family works. At the end of day's work they return home, have meal, and then swallow liquor. Male dominance and domestic violence is a common phenomenon. If a woman gives birth to a female child she is rebuked by the male members of the family as if she herself has produced the baby.

At the workplace workers do not get any precautionary tools like gloves, aprons, masks, etc. They work in a tremendously vulnerable condition. Since the street cleaners handle garbage and wastes without taking precautionary measures, they remain subject to chronic diseases. On the other hand, they are not entitled to medical care and treatment. Indeed their sorrows are multifaceted and know no bound.

IV. Rights of the Street Cleaners

² Information used in this case study were collected during the period September 16 to September 28, 2012

As has been noted earlier, this study examines the rights of the street cleaners from three vintage points: rights to work, rights at work, and rights through work.

4.1 Rights to work

Rights to work can be examined in terms of employment contract, elimination of child labor and protection of adolescent, protection against forced and compulsory labor. From the field survey it has been found that on an average one-half of the street cleaners work on daily basis; that is, workers get wage for the days they work. One-half of the street cleaners are permanently employed. Those who are permanently employed get appointment letters and other benefits. But those who work on temporary (i.e. daily) basis do not get any appointment letters. Here lies a loophole through which corruption takes place.

Cleaners that are appointed on daily basis have to report to Regional Supervisors (RS). The RSs are supposed to monitor at the field level whether or not the cleaners appointed on daily-basis work properly. But in practice the RSs seldom remain present at field level. They usually come during wage payment time. Cleaners opined that RSs include fictitious names in the registers and take away money every month.

The permanently employed street cleaners have got identity cards, but they are not much aware about whether or not there is any service book. The concerned DCC officials told that there is provision for service book, employee register, and detailed guidelines of job termination.

As regards termination, there exists permanent fear of job loss in the minds of the street cleaners sensing that they are minorities. Out of that fear, all of them remain busy in trying to be in the good book of the concerned officers of the DCC. As has been clarified by a leader of the street cleaners:

“We are the minorities. Gentle people of the society do not like and love us. We have got nobody to uphold our rights. It is we who have to ensure our own rights. We have to deal with the top officials of the Corporation. They have no heart and soul, no mercy. They can dismiss us any time they want. We are not organized like workers of other sectors. Therefore, they can purchase us very easily.”

Both permanent and temporary workers can terminate their job at their will. The permanent workers have to submit a written application if they want termination from job, but for the temporary workers only a verbal notice is sufficient. When asked whether their job can be terminated by the employers, the cleaners replied in the affirmative. They think that DCC can terminate their job any time. The argument sounds sensible, for the supply and availability of labor is greater than its demand. The case of Shantibala bears the testimony of whether or not the street cleaners enjoy the rights to work:

Case Study of Shantibala

Shantibala did not get permanent job of street cleaner even after cleaning the office of the Deputy Commissioner (DC) of Dhaka for long 14 years. Every single day of these fourteen years Shantibala thought one day she will get job. Her sorrows would go away. She can lead a fair life with her two sons. But she has nothing left in her life after the midday of July 24th this year. All her dreams fell apart.

While she was giving the ‘Cleaner Appointment Test’ on July 23rd she had a strong belief in mind that she would get the job. But she became frustrated by seeing the name of Musa fakir of other religion in the notice board on Tuesday noon (24 July). In the guise of formal test, the DC has discarded her labor of long fourteen years. The DC has ignored the restriction of 80% quota declared reserved for the minority people by the Prime Minister.

In this regard, Munna Das, leader of the street cleaners, told that always people from other religions get their job in exchange of thick amount of money. Even if a few minority people now and then get job, they also have to pay bribe. The administration does not do justice.

Fourteen years have passed by sweeping the DC office. But Shantibala did not get her job. Her only fault is that she was born in a minority family. Since birth she has been experiencing a life full of curse. She could not grow up like average children of the society. Nor could she took ducation from school. Since she was daughter of a sweeper, she had to leave her school at the early age. Then, as per the norms and practice she was given marriage to Lalu das of the same caste. Only after seven years of marriage Lalu went to the land of no return. After Lalu’s demise, Shantibala got the job of sweeping and cleaning the DCC with the aid of other sweepers fourteen years ago. The then Shantibala had been sweeping the DC office quite regularly for fourteen years she did not get even a singly taka. Shantibala said, “I have tried many days to meet DC sir to tell my problem. But every time I tried other employees stopped my from that.”

Besides, two sons of Shantibala, Bikash and Mithu, have grown up amidst of their mother’s poverty and curse. Although the two brothers could not study much due to the negligence of the teachers, they have become musicians. Mithu said, ‘everybody rebukes us. We are lower caste, raise pork, drink liquor, sale liquor, but nobody gives us freedom from the curse of this inhuman life and poverty.’ Shantibala’s younger son Bikash said, ‘we apply in every government recruitment announcements, but we do not get job; people from other religions get our jobs. Our 80% government quota do not fulfill ever.’ Indeed Shantibala’s future is totally uncertain now.

4.2 Rights at work

Indicators of measuring the rights at work include protection against discrimination at workplace, protection against harassment and oppression, working hours and work time, rest and leave, occupational accidents, hazards and diseases, safety equipment/tools and facilities, and welfare facilities. It has been found from the field survey that there exists discrimination in wage rate of male and female cleaners. The daily rate of wage for permanent male cleaners is Tk. 190 while that of the female cleaners is Tk. 140. For the master-role cleaners the daily rate of wage is Tk. 150. Female cleaners face different types of harassment and oppression but the male cleaners do not face any such problem. Working hour for both male and female cleaners is eight hours a day and the permissible overtime is four hours for both male and female

cleaners. Although the DCC officials have told that female cleaners work only during day time, in practice female cleaners also work with male cleaners at night. This indeed creates a window of humiliation for the female cleaners.

Only the permanent street cleaners enjoy one day's weekly holiday on Saturday, but the temporary street cleaners do not enjoy any such benefit. Rather, the temporary street cleaners have to work hard on every Saturday. Although in principle the permanent street cleaners are entitled to get seven days' casual leave, in practice availability of this leave depend on the will of the DCC officials. There is no provision of earned leave for the street cleaners. They also cannot enjoy festival leave although there is a provision of two days' festival leave. The female street cleaners are entitled to get twenty days' maternity leave and if any female cleaner fails to join work after twenty days, their wage is reduced at piecemeal rate. There is no provision for sick leave, annual leave, and rest for the street cleaners.

The street cleaners work without any preventive tools such as masks, gloves, shoes, etc. They handle garbage and wastes with naked hands and mouth. Hence they suffer from chronic stomach diseases, skin diseases. As the street cleaners handle wastes and rubbish regularly, after working for couple of years they lose smelling ability. The permanent street cleaners are given with a sleeveless yellow apron, which distinguishes them from the street cleaners working on master-role basis.

The proposition 'welfare facilities' do not actually apply to the street cleaners. When asked whether or not they enjoy any welfare facility the street cleaners told that there is no provision of first aid facilities and health care facilities for them. They do not get any type of health and safety information and education. The cleaners told that since they work on the streets under open sky the issues of canteen, restroom, and daycare facilities are not relevant for them.

4.3 Rights through Work

Rights through work can be measured in terms of wage and work related benefits, social security instruments and labor relations and social dialogue. Wage of the permanent cleaners is fixed according to the government wage rate. DCC does not have much to do about it. But DCC officials fix-up the wage of the master-role cleaners, though they do not consider issues like commodity price, cost of living etc. while fixing wage rate. Permanent cleaners get their wages almost regularly but the master-role cleaners do not get their wages on a regular basis. During the field survey street cleaners complained that the DCC officers curtail their wages whimsically. But DCC officers disagreed with such complaints. The overtime rate is Tk. 25 per hour for the male street cleaners and Tk. 20 for the female street cleaners.

The permanent street cleaners enjoy the benefits of pension but the master-role cleaners do not get so. Cleaners told that they have to face much hassle and harassment to get their pension. For the permanent street cleaners there is a provision of contributory provident fund. Each cleaner contributes 10 percent of their wage to the provident fund. They also contribute Tk. 50 each month to the welfare fund, though the cleaners told that they seldom can have any benefit of the welfare fund. There is no provision of insurance and compensation for the street cleaners. The female street cleaners can enjoy maternity leave for twenty days with pay, but if any female cleaner fails to join work after twenty days her wage is reduced at the daily wage rate of Tk. 140. The street cleaners do not avail any treatment and rehabilitation opportunity if they commit any accident, nor is there any provision for developing alternative skills.

Although the service delivered by the street cleaners is an essential element of urban life, this section of the working poor live a miserable social and work life. The street cleaners are not organized albeit there is no formal restriction on their joining unions. The street cleaners cannot organize any fruitful movement because parties against whom the movement is organized can easily spoil their attempt by bribing a few influential people of the street cleaners' community. During the field survey street cleaners opined that they must be united in order to ensure their rights.

V. Conclusion

In conclusion, it is noteworthy that the street cleaners live a miserable life although their job is to keep the city streets clean in order to ensure healthy life for the city dwellers. Although the current Prime Minister has declared that 80 percent of the job quota of cleaners be reserved for the lower caste Hindu people, in practice this ceiling is not maintained. People from other religions get the job of street cleaners from the restricted quota by paying underhand money to the DCC officials. The street cleaners' children cannot avail other jobs because they cannot receive formal education.

The street cleaners are deprived both at the work place and at the social arena. They always remain encircled by a vicious circle of social stigma, which destroys all their potentials. Due to lack of alternative skill development program members of the street cleaners' family cannot join other jobs. The situation is such that children of the street cleaners are by birth destined to be street cleaners. Their work environment as well as work process is highly injurious to health. DCC do not supply any preventive tools to the street cleaners. Although many street cleaners fall severely sick due to handling garbage and dust on a regular basis, there is no medical treatment and rehabilitation program for them. If the concerned authority does not take steps to address the problems faced by the street cleaners, their saga would continue in the days to come.

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