

# **VOICE FOR CHANGE**

**Sewerage Workers Negotiating Caste, Dignity  
and State Apathy**

**A Praxis Publication (2014)**



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Dignity and State Apathy**

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**Voice for Change: Sewerage Workers Negotiating Caste, Dignity and State Apathy**



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## PREFACE

Praxis – Institute for Participatory Practices is a not-for-profit, autonomous, development organisation, committed to the democratisation of development processes. It is devoted to advocating for community-led development initiatives and governance practices that centralise the perspectives of marginalised groups. In order to do this, Praxis endeavours to identify opportunities and forums in which vulnerable and excluded groups are able to voice their concerns and aspirations in a meaningful way.

Set against the context of a growing interest among global civil society and state actors on the process to decide what should replace the Millennium Development Goals after 2015, a United Nations High-Level Panel has been constituted with three co-chairs, the Prime Ministers of the United Kingdom and Indonesia and the President of Liberia. The High-Level Panel came up with its report of recommendations in this regard about a year ago.

Praxis is part of a Participatory Research Group formed by Institute for Development Studies, Sussex (IDS) and Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD) as part of its DFID supported programme. The group aims to support those living in poverty to express their perspectives and attempt to convey this to decision makers.

As part of various initiatives to influence post 2015 Development agenda, Praxis has initiated a “Voice For Change” document series that seeks to enhance the participation of the community while acknowledging that participation is not a technical or a mechanical process that can be realised through the application of a set of static and universal tools and techniques, but rather a political process that requires challenging the existing power structure. It sees a community not as an object but rather an agent of change. The series is an attempt to help vulnerable communities to analyse, dialogue and voice their perspectives on development goals.

The third issue: **Voice For Change: Sewerage Workers Negotiating Caste, Dignity and State Apathy** is focused on the issues that thousands of sewerage workers in the country face on a daily basis. They enter sewers manually to clean them with minimal safety equipment. Other precarious work conditions, instability because of the contractual nature of work and poor pay and benefits notwithstanding, sewerage workers also face a general apathy from the state that should ideally ensure their rights are not violated. These voices amplify various issues ranging from discriminations of caste to the undignified manner in which they are treated, from the hazardous nature of their work and indifference to their plight and culminate in a series of demands. A comprehensive account about sewerage workers can be found in the report *Down the Drain! A Study on Occupational and Health Hazards and the Perils of Contracting Faced by Sewerage Workers in Delhi* (Praxis 2014). Also appended are audio-visual materials in the form of a participatory video, *Down the Drain (Gutter Me Zindagi)*, which was created by sewerage workers.

Praxis acknowledges the valuable contributions by National Campaign for Dignity and Rights for Sewerage and Allied Workers (NCDARSAW), Occupational Health and Safety Management Consultancy Services (OHSMCS, participants of the Participatory Video process, Institute for Development Studies, Participate, and all the sewerage workers who shared their experiences to help produce this document.

Pradeep Narayanan  
Director, Research and Consultancies

Tom Thomas  
CEO



## SETTING THE CONTEXT

Sewerage workers have always played the role of maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in societies, but in India, they have been denied rights and dignity due to citizens. The management of sewerage lines and wastes from dry latrines or from water closet toilets has been traditionally bestowed on one particular community/caste i.e. Valmikis. Despite Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, which provides that no human agency shall be employed to carry the night soil on his/her head, the sewerage worker continues to immerse his bare body in toxic wastes and gases while cleaning sewer lines. This is especially common in metro cities having large deep sewer lines.

Based on a few studies on health and safety status of sewerage workers and sporadic reports about occupational morbidity and mortality among sewer workers, the Supreme Court of India observed that the State could not “absolve themselves of the responsibility to put in place effective mechanisms for ensuring safety of the workers employed for maintaining and cleaning the sewerage system”. Through participatory exercises, survey-based research and participatory video process, the voices of sanitation workers in Delhi and Patna were brought together in this document to understand the issues they face and their demands for the future.

**“We clean this filth and people treat us as if we ourselves are the filth”**

“If we don’t clean this filth, then who will?” asks Mahender, a sewerage worker. He says, “cities have immense problems escalated by the growth of urbanisation and the worst issue is that maintaining the city’s hygiene and health work”. The demand for sewer and waste management services has been on the rise because of growing population in metro cities as well as the vast geographical expansion of cities. There is an attempt to create socio-cultural mechanisms to ensure there are always a class of people available to do work that is considered dirty or low. “We clean this filth and people treat us as if we ourselves are the filth,” he adds.



Agencies that employ contractual sanitation workers do not give them facilities that are rightfully due to permanent government employees. “There is the fear that if Dalits who do sewerage work are given benefits, then they will rise in social status. Their children will get education and employment with good pay packages. Then there is the fear that they will be unwilling to do sewerage cleaning work,” says Ashok, who has been working for the rights of sewerage workers for several years. There is the need for this kind of labour, but there are hardly enough people to do it, says Ashok.

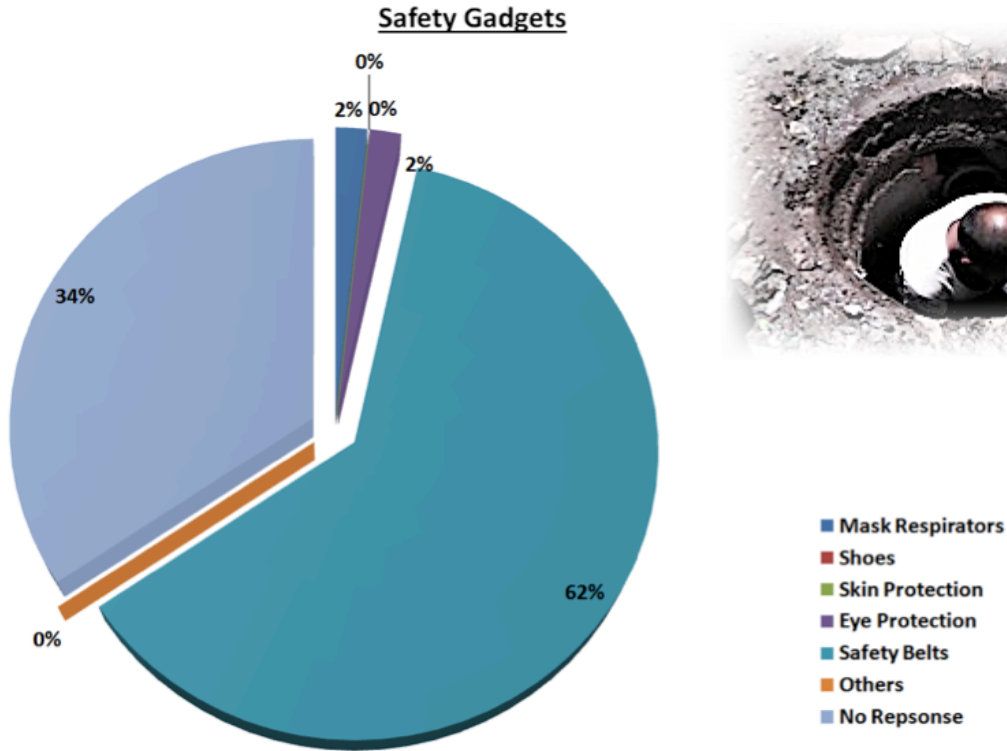
“They want to treat us as their bonded labour and so they keep us in poor circumstances with hardly any facilities,” says Ved Prakash, an employee with the Delhi Jal Board (the water board) who started off as a sewerage worker more than 20 years ago. In addition to this overt caste dynamics, which has bestowed one caste (the Valmikis) with the responsibility of sanitation work, there is a class dynamic too that is at play. Permanent workers of Delhi Jal Board, which is responsible for keeping the sewerage lines clean, rarely do this work. Only contract workers do the task of actually going into the drains and cleaning blocked lines. Mahender, who himself belongs to a higher caste, is a contract worker and is unable to even disclose this to his family members, because of the way it is perceived. “I have to do this work because I am not educated to get any other job. I can do this job and do it better if I get facilities due to me. But I don’t.”

Workers who have been in the job for more than 10 years have formed strong linkages within the union or management and are generally seen as privileged and slowly turn into middlemen or facilitators for providing a contractual job within the department. As there are several other issues within the department,



like wages, appointment of contractual workforce, working condition etc., officials also do not want to disturb the workers who are established which could escalate a management – union confrontation. In this system, workers with greater sustenance duration become good negotiators as well as management tools to address distress within the work force. Almost 89% of sewerage workers continue to work beyond the first year.

The Delhi Jal Board workers’ union has been working extensively to ban sub contracting of sewerage work



but the results are yet to show as seen in these experiences below. Primary among the fallout is the absence of safety mechanisms.

**“Most of the time, we go into the drains with no safety measures whatsoever”**

“We go down into the drains where there are pieces of glass, toxic fumes, dirt and insects among other things, but there is no safety for us,” says Mathura Prasad, who has been a sewerage worker for 20 years. “We use our bare hands to take out the garbage from the drains. Sometimes, we could get hurt by blades or knives that are disposed into these wastes,” he adds. “We go into the drains where machines cannot be used because of many reasons such as lack of space or its ineffectiveness,” says Rajesh.

In a public interest litigation filed in the Supreme Court over the unavailability of safety equipment like gas cylinders, breathing masks, safety goggles, the Court in 2011 criticised the government for unavailability of such basic requirements risking the lives of so many workers. The Supreme Court directed the government to immediately provide the essentials and improve the standards of operations<sup>1</sup>, but reality is far removed from this stricture.

Narayan Singh Dharma, supervisor at Delhi Jal Board, explains the irony of the poor safety conditions in which they work. “A nurse who gives an injection in a hospital wears gloves and gets risk allowance. But a sewerage worker who goes 20 feet deep into a drain gets nothing.” The drains expose the workers to

<sup>1</sup> These include free medical examination and treatment to sewer workers; payment of compensation to those suffering from occupational diseases, ailments or accidents; an immediate ex gratia solatium of Rupees one lakh on the death of any worker, including any contract worker; payment of all statutory dues such as provident fund, gratuity and bonus to sewer workers including contract workers; provision of all possible modern protective equipment; provision of soap and oil to all workmen; restrooms and canteens, first-aid facilities, safe drinking water, washing facilities, latrines and urinals, shelters, crèches and canteens at ‘stores’.





diseases such as lung infection, skin diseases, and sometimes, even cancer. These are in addition to accidents that occur because of the lack of safety equipment. “We go into the drain with nothing but a rope and bucket,” says Lalit. Sometimes, the rope is itself nothing short of a noose. He recounts an incident in 2011 when he had filled a bucket with garbage and passed it on to his colleague who has waiting outside the drain. “The rope gave way and the heavy bucket fell on my leg,” he says.

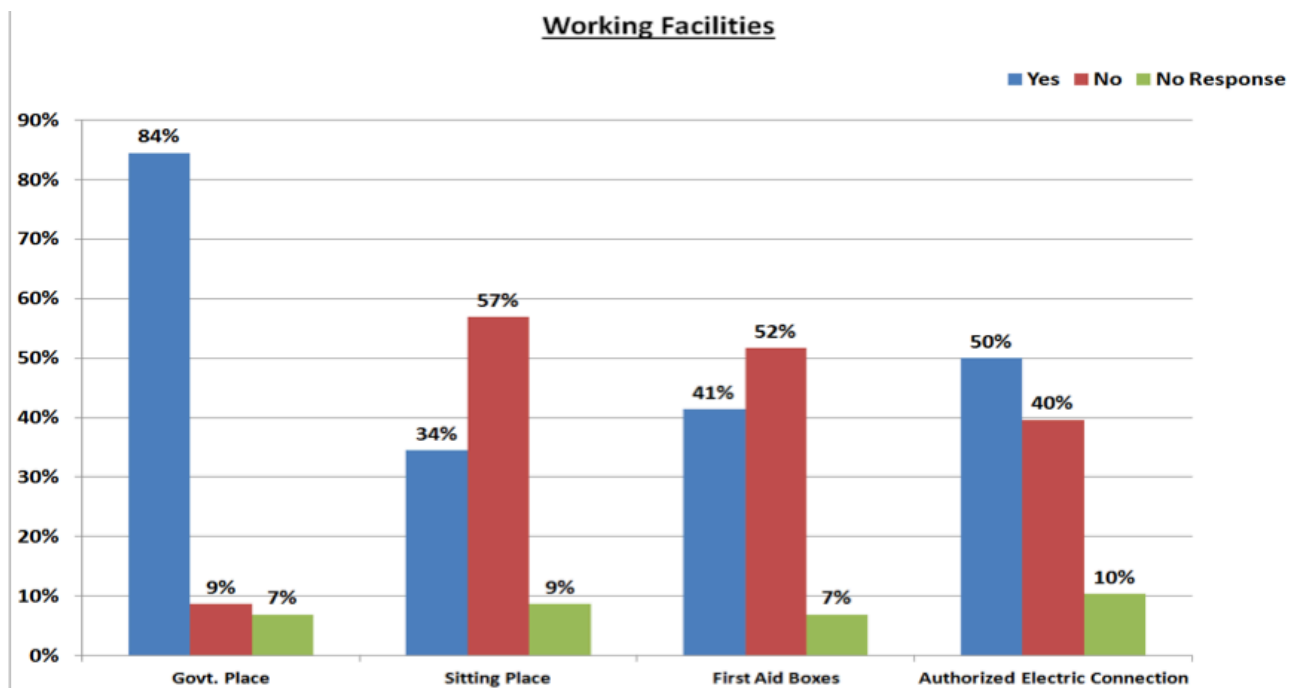
“If we have jackets/body suits, helmets fitted with lights, gloves, goggles and shoes, we will be able to do a good job,” says Mahender. But what comes up is the poor quality of these things. The gloves are so ill fitting that often the sewerage water seeps into the gloves and into the shoes. “What would be useful are body suits,” as they have in other countries, says Ved Prakash.

**“Very poor condition of store”**

Once out of the drain, there are hardly any facilities to clean themselves. Sewer workers rest in offices called ‘stores’. The Delhi Jal Board has ‘main’ or big stores mostly located with other offices of the Board whereas subsidiary or small stores are meant only for sewer cleaning operations and are generally informal and temporary arrangements.

“We don’t even get oil and soap to clean ourselves,” says Chand. They have to arrange for these themselves. Even for those who can afford this, there are other practical problems like the lack of space. “See the broken fans, the dirty toilets. Even the tap runs dry here. There is no place where we can sit and eat in peace. The toilets are so bad that you cannot use them,” says Chetan. The rest rooms are in such states of disrepair that the walls are damp because of leakage. “We often wash ourselves at the municipal taps on the roadside,” says another worker.

**Table: Basic amenities available in stores**



Chand says that the stores, where the equipment used by sewerage workers is kept, are well stocked but they don’t have access to these, as they are contract workers. However, Dharma, who is with the Delhi Jal Board has a different take. “We don’t have facilities for our own employees. How would we provide anything to the contract workers?”

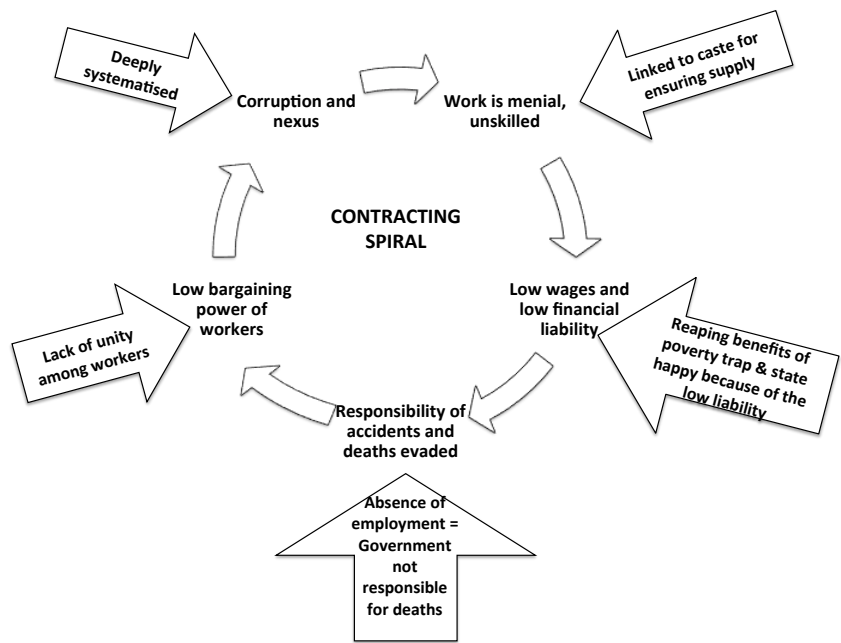
In many cases, the sewerage workers are unaware about what facilities there ought to be and what there are. Regardless of this tussle, what is undeniable is the lack of avenues where these issues can be taken up.



**“I don't even know who my contractor is”**

The problem of the contract system is that it invisibilises the authority responsible for the safety and well being of the sewerage workers. “The attitude of the joint engineers is often very irresponsible,” says a participant. On the other hand, the contract system also exacerbates the situation because sewerage workers are not given identities that enable them to access services.

“Once while I was working in a drain in Khanpur, I started feeling suffocated. I managed to climb out, but felt nauseous. When I told my supervisor that I would not be able to continue, he forced me to go back,” Govind Raj says. As contract workers, they are forced to work without leave, even if they suffer injuries.



“When you complain that the toxic fumes within the drain are too powerful for you to continue working, the supervisors point to cockroaches inside and say how come those are surviving?” says Mahender, referring to the callous attitude of the contractors and supervisors.

Being contract workers, they lose out on insurance the government agencies provide their employees. More than 57% of the respondents in the survey said they did not have any life insurance. 41% mentioned having insurance cover, but they knew little about the amount and the policy. Most of their meagre salaries are spent on treatment at private clinics. Lalit says when he had an accident in which he almost suffered a fatal injury; there was nobody to turn to. “I paid for my own treatment.” There is a lack of awareness of schemes that they can benefit from. In addition, they are unaware that the law prohibits entering manholes.

The overarching insecurity of the profession and the way it pans out is that since no proper records are maintained, in case of any accident, the contractor can easily wash his hands off the case, saying the particular worker did not work under him. As some of their family members are not aware about the kind of work they do, they fear what will happen to their families in case they are hurt in any way. “There is no future in this work,” Govind Raj says.

Because the government has subcontracted sewerage work to private agencies, there is no job security. They get paid just Rs 4500 a month, a fraction of what the Delhi Jal Board employees get paid. “I work from 9 am to noon, but at times, the sewerage lines are so dirty that I am forced to work till night,” says Mathura Prasad.

There is also the added problem of corruption. Bribes are given and taken to give people permanent jobs in the department. Mathura Prasad’s son points out that his father has been employed for close to 25 years but has yet not become permanent. “We have lost out on education and job opportunities. None of us brothers are married. We lost our mother because we could not pay for her treatment.” “When the lists were issued to appoint permanent staff, people from outside, who paid hefty bribes, easily fit the bill. Others remained as temporary workers without any security,” says Mathura Prasad.

In addition to the absence of job security is the question of identity. Shayam is 45 and Suresh is 37 years old, and both are working as contractual workers with Delhi Jal Board since the past four years. However



they do not have any evidence to prove that they are employed by DJB. As sewerage workers do not have any document to prove they work for Delhi Jal Board, they face problems on multiple counts. They cannot access medical check-ups and services in hospitals that are available to employees of the Board. "Sometimes, people ask us to clean the toilets in their houses. When we refuse, saying we are employed to clean the sewerage lines and not their personal toilets, they don't believe us. They ask us for identity proof, which we don't have, which makes things worse for us," says a participant.

**"Is it the work itself that discriminates or the way the work is done?"**

The undignified way in which sewerage workers are forced to carry out their work exposes them to discrimination in addition to the caste-based discrimination that is already built into the profession. "People see us as if we are filth," says Mahender. "If I ask someone for water while working, they come and give me water from such a distance as if coming closer will make them untouchables," said Ravi.



"People look at you in a bad way, covering their noses or turning the other way," says Mahender. He adds that they are at times given drinking water from the bathroom taps. "Why this discrimination?"

People from any other community who get involved in this work because of financial constraints are uncomfortable with its implications on their caste status. "People call me a bhangi (used in a derogatory manner to indicate a person who belongs to a caste that does sanitation work) even though I do not belong to the caste," says Mahender. Because he belongs to a higher caste, even his relatives do not know what work he does.

"Till date, nobody has called me by my name," says one of the participants, highlighting the way in which sewerage workers are treated. The discrimination, extends to the families of the sewerage workers too. For example, Sonu, the son of a sanitation worker with the Delhi Jal Board was unable to get admission in school. His father refused to approach the department for help out of fear that his family would cease to respect him if they knew what work they did. Sonu lost out on a year in school. "This may be because of the dirty nature of the work we do. After all, we enter into drains carrying human excreta, waste and garbage. There is a foul smell when we do work," another participant rationalises. "We often enter this sea of waste wearing just our vests."

**BARRIERS**

There is hardly any scope for collectivisation. "We are not allowed to join unions," said a participant. There are no possibilities or occasions to come together to discuss and advocate for their rights as often they don't have the time to get into such activities and at others there is threat of losing one's job, which is already of a very temporary and insecure nature.

"This is a conspiracy of the upper castes to keep the lower castes where they are and not let them thrive," says Ashok, adding that there is the need to get rid of the caste dimension of sewerage work. Despite a strong provision like the Employment of Manual Scavenging and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act, 1993, which prohibits manual scavenging, the practice is widespread. In addition, as traditionally, one caste has been forced to perform this job, the link between the two may be seen as connected.



On the other hand, there are instances where sewerage workers who belong to manual scavenging communities are not willing to have workers from other communities doing this work. They want to keep it as their own traditional work and have a monopoly over it.

Lack of accountability mechanisms is another barrier. “Records are maintained on rough pieces of paper,” says a participant. They are hardly of use in case of accidents. In case of any accident, the contractor can feign innocence.

“Because of the contract system, we often don’t even know our contractor.” Because of the way in which the system operates, there is an invisibilising of any scope for accountability. Salim, a sewerage worker, approached his contractors to enquire about safety equipment. Each time, he was turned away and threatened to mind his business or lose his job.

**DEMANDS**



**“We should also get access to medical and other benefits”**

“What is preventing them from allotting risk allowance?” asks Dharma. “We should also get access to health and medical benefits, so that we don’t have to spend on this out of our meagre salaries,” says a participant. When a sewerage worker falls ill or hurts himself, he has to forgo salary on the leave he takes and also pay for his medicines.

**Respect for sewerage work**

“Only if people of all castes come to do this work will this be delinked from caste. That is possible, only if sewerage work is made more dignified,” says Ved Prakash. This alone can lead to end of discrimination faced by all sanitation workers. “It is essential to end the inhuman way in which sewerage work is undertaken,” says Ashok.

**Change in employment status with full benefits**

“There should be immediate termination of the contract system,” said a participant. In addition to this, they demanded minimum wages and other benefits that Delhi Jal Board employees get along with job security.



“We should have identity cards,” said a participant.

### Safety equipment and training to avoid accidents

“We need jackets/body suits, helmets fitted with lights, gloves, goggles and shoes,” says Mahender.

The needs of sewerage workers are summarised in the figure below:



- Publicise the names of all contractors and make all the terms of each of the contracts available on a website for public use. Monthly detailed expenses against the contract should be made available on a quarterly basis and displayed in each of the stores
- Provide full body suits to all sewerage workers, including contractual workers.
- Provide identity cards to all contractual workers and make them aware of their entitlements vis-à-vis contractors.

- Sewerage work is technical work and therefore should not be treated as 'unskilled'. It should be provided a 'skilled job' status for the purpose of wage calculation.
- Workers should have access to all safety equipment, without which they should not be allowed to enter sewer lines. They have to be adequately and periodically trained on the use of the safety equipment.
- Social audits and social equity audits of the stores and contractors should be conducted on an immediate basis to present a clearer picture of gaps and challenges and also the areas of corruption.

- Abolish sub contracting
- DJB should maintain a permanent cadre of sewerage workers by issuing identity cards. Only such authorised sewerage workers can be engaged for sewer work.
- There is a due process to enter sewer lines. Only an agency that has been involved in doing this work knows this process and should be used for this purpose. Sewerage workers have to be trained on a periodic basis with latest techniques and practices.
- Mechanisation is important and necessary. It does not mean that there would not be any need for sewerage workers. Human interface would still be needed. Necessary technological changes need to be incorporated but this should not come at the cost of the jobs of the workers, as they would lose their only source of income. The workers in regular or contract employment must not be terminated; rather they must all be given regular employment.



## CONCLUSIONS

The contractual nature of work, unsafe work practices, precarious attitude of concerned authorities have been responsible for the perpetual high morbidity and mortality of sewerage workers. Many reports indicate accidental deaths of these workers in metro cities. There is thus a huge gap between what has been done and what needs to be done. There is a need to identify the reasons for deprioritisation of the health of sewer workers. In addition to the dehumanising way in which the work is carried out, the nature of work, the stigma associated with it and the lack of accountability mechanisms despite government schemes leaves the sewerage workers with little financial or social capital to fall back on in times of crisis. While they voiced their concerns about the stigma associated with their profession, their lack of basic identity, the inhuman conditions of work, lack of basic safety equipment and most importantly about lack of accountability, the sewerage workers displayed a reasonably fair level of awareness about provisions and entitlements that have now been made mandatory. While this awareness is yet to transform into an understanding of rights and entitlements that is due to them as citizens, their indistinct voices articulate very clearly their immediate and modest demands which range from things as basic as body suits, helmets, gloves and goggles to medical and other benefits; from change in the terms of their employment to basic dignity and respect. Is there any scope in the post 2015 MDG discussions to accommodate these voices from the sewerage lines?

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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### About Praxis

Praxis - Institute for Participatory Practices is a knowledge-based, not-for-profit development support organisation, registered in 1997 under the Indian Societies Registration Act of 1860. Since its humble beginnings, Praxis has emerged as an independent one-stop centre for undertaking action research, training and documentation dealing with multiple facets of participatory development. Our work vindicates the growing mandate across geographical boundaries that for development to be sustainable and equitable, there is an urgent need to ensure good governance practices and processes. Our strategic networking capability with like-minded people and organisations helps maximise our outreach and increases manifold the impact of our interventions.

### Our Vision

A world without poverty in which every person has the right to participate in decision-making processes, and to a life with dignity and choices.

### Our Mission

To strive for the democratisation of development processes and institutions to ensure that the voices of poor women, men, transgenders, girls and boys are heard and acted upon.



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