

He Died on Diwali Inside a Sewage Pipe

Subhashini Ali

In a few days, on the 29th of November, a group of four *safai karmacharis* (sweepers) and three *beldars* (diggers) along with three more senior persons, all working for the New Delhi Municipal Council (NDMC), will be returning from a week-long official trip to Japan and South Korea where they are learning first-hand about sanitation, cleanliness, waste disposal as well as the maintenance of urban colonies, markets etc. The NDMC Chairman, Naresh Kumar, said, "We took the decision to boost their morale".

The NDMC would achieve real morale-boosting if it implemented the stringent safety regulations which govern sanitary work in those countries.

A week before the team of workers departed, one of their colleagues who, unlike them, was a contract sanitary worker for the Delhi Jal Board (DJB), had died inside a pipe in the Keshopur Sewage Treatment Plant while repairing a leak.

Vinay Sirohi, only 22 years old, was a high school graduate who was pursuing his graduation "privately". His mother, a widow, also works at the same plant. Vinay was married to Rachna only 11 months ago and had wanted to spend Diwali at home but left reluctantly saying that he would be back by 3.00 pm, before the celebrations began.

At 2.00 pm, his family was informed that he had gone missing. His body was found the next day after the police used gas cutters to cut through the pipe.

According to the rules, Sirohi should have been accompanied by two other workers when he entered the pipeline, but he went in alone; he should have been wearing a helmet, a face mask and gum boots with a safety rope around his waist, but he went in bereft of all these. A newspaper report said that "following the incident, officials of the Sewage Treatment Plant are likely to issue an advisory for operators and workers about the safety precautions to be taken". That should do a lot for their morale!

Deaths like Vinay Sirohi's occur almost every day and are reported in the papers in small paragraphs that are hard to find. The fact that he died so young on Diwali, a day of joyous celebration, made his death poignant enough to merit a few headlines and photographs of his grieving wife and mother in several dailies in the National Capital. TV channels also covered the "event". Had they taken the trouble to show their viewers how he died, it might have shocked many into demanding real change in the lives of sanitation workers. The fact that what happened was happening in the National Capital may have brought the reality behind the facade of the Swachh Bharat campaign home to many.

Sanitation workers who clean out sewage blockages have to immerse themselves in a hell-hole. Once in, they are assaulted by a "sudden blast of putrid sludge - besides methane, hydrogen sulphide, carbon dioxide and carbon monoxide". A worker who has been there and back says "Even if we manage not to swallow the toxic muck, it manages to enter our bodies" (from the *Drishti* documentary "Lesser Humans").

In 2005, a study of sewer workers titled "Hole to Hell" was conducted by the Center for Education and Communication (CEC), Delhi. Dr Ashish Mittal, an Occupational Health physician who co-authored the report, says, "A manhole is a confined, oxygen-deficient space where the presence of noxious gases can cause syncope - a sudden and transient loss of consciousness... the long term neurological effects of syncope can be debilitating". In developed countries, like the ones the sanitation workers from Delhi are currently visiting, the sewers are well-lit and aerated with huge fans and the workers are protected by bunny suits and respiratory apparatus. In Delhi, the workers wear a belt connected with thick ropes to men outside but this offers them no protection against gases and sharp objects that assault them inside. Poor Vinay did not even have a rope. During Mittal's six-month study using 200 workers, three of them died. The average age of sanitary workers is said to be 45 years.

A 2007 [article](#) in *Tehelka* magazine estimated that there are at least 1,43,000 sewer workers in urban India. Assuming a Mortality Rate of 25 for this group. 3,575 sewer workers die every year. 10 every day. (According to Visaria, member of

the advisory council of the Population Foundation of India, Tehelka's is a "very conservative" projection.)

The Government of India is holding a special two-day session of Parliament on November 25-26 to honour Dr BR Ambedkar whose 125th birth anniversary falls on April 14 next year. It would be most appropriate if the inhuman exploitation of sanitation workers is discussed and condemned in this session and immediate steps taken to bring their working conditions to the level prevailing in civilised countries. Otherwise, the workers returning from Japan and Korea and hundreds of thousands like them will find little to "boost their morale". They will only be confronted with images of other Vinays and other grieving widows, mothers and children.

(Subhashini Ali is former MP, former Member of the National Commission for Women and Vice President of the All India Democratic Women's Association.)

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