

# Story of Hyderabad sewer workers: A tale which no one knows

By Nilesh Vijaykumar | Express News Service | Published: 14th March 2017 02:55 AM |

Last Updated: 14th March 2017 10:46 AM | A+ A A- |



File picture of a sewage worker in Hyderabad | Express

HYDERABAD: Sewer lineman Devaraju's day starts when he sets out with a list of complaints to attend to. These are blocked-sewer complaints from across Hyderabad. He starts from the Hyderabad Metropolitan Water Supply and Sewerage Board (HMWSSB) office in Sitaphalmandi at 9 am. He climbs down manholes, clears the clogged filth with his bare hands and goes on to the next. He does six or seven a day.

It has been close to two decades since he started out in this 'vocation' if it can be called that. He is today what is called an 'outsourced' employee engaged by the Water Board, which effectively means he is not on its rolls but does its shitty business. He makes Rs 6,700 per month.

Devaraju is among more than 1000 sewer linemen who unclog Hyderabad's sewer lines every day. Speaking to sewer linemen working on outsourced basis with HMWS and SB revealed some shocking facts, including that none of them get a single day holiday. They work all days of the year. If they take leave when sick, their salary is cut.

## Getting into the manhole

The number of times Devaraju needs to get inside a manhole has decreased over the years, not because the HMWSSB has become sensitized to the issue but mainly due to the fear of the backlash it has to face when a worker dies in a manhole. But the practice persists, and the conditions of their work have not changed. The sewers contain high amounts of methane which can kill a human in minutes.

Devaraju says, "When we open the manhole cover we see the gas bubbling up as a white floating mass. We wait for it to escape, sometimes even for an hour. We sometimes get water from the residences nearby and pour a few buckets into the manhole so that the gas escapes. Once we are sure that there is no more gas, we enter the manhole."

Another sewer line worker, speaking on the condition of anonymity, says, "When I started off in this job, there were a few times when I opened a manhole and the gas just knocked me off my feet. I once felt so nauseated that I staggered and almost fell into the manhole. It was quite a scary experience."

Most sewer linemen use no safety gear, not even a mask or gloves. They just enter the manholes and clear the waste clogging the sewer lines, which can range from used sanitary pads, diapers, used condoms, plastic waste and human waste.

No sewer line worker has heard of any medical check-ups by the government. There have been no surveys to find out the health impacts on sewer line workers due to prolonged exposure to disease-causing environment.

## Limited use of machines

The air-tech machines that help in clearing blocked sewer lines have helped in reducing the number of times a sewer lineman has to get down a manhole.

Devaraju says, "Only when the manholes are very deep and the machine proves useless are we forced

to enter the manhole.”

However, there are only 58 machines for all of Hyderabad’s four lakh manholes. An HMWSSB official said they are “expecting” new machines to be inducted this month.

The machines are not of much use in small lanes or when the amount of waste to be cleared is huge. The sewer lineman is the only fallback then.

Ads by Kiosked