

From obscurity to pride: Babuli's journey from invisible worker to Garima supervisor, Odisha, India

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Figure 1 – Core Sanitation Workers (CSWs) in Bhubaneswar. Source: H&UDD.

Summary

India is home to over five million sanitation workers who form the backbone of its sanitation systems. In a labour-driven field, they work in unsafe conditions having to deal with human faeces. It is disheartening to see that despite their seminal contribution to the society, this community has been subjected for ages to the worst forms of discrimination attributable to multiple vulnerabilities, such as poverty, malnutrition, illiteracy, disease and exploitation. The social stigma associated with their occupation has traditionally pushed them to the lowest rung of the social pyramid making their life and living difficult and thoroughly compromised. It is an irony that generation after generation, they continue to serve us and suffer in order that we may live.

Manual scavenging has been a stark example of discrimination in the name of caste, practised in India, relegating the less privileged to perform sanitation work handling human faecal matter. Despite the Nation making several strides in various sectors and competing with the best in the world, these underprivileged people were made to render this invaluable service to the society for generations, and deprived of safety, dignity and a decent livelihood, as well as from suffering social stigma and exclusion.

Odisha, as the pioneer in many areas of development, is the first state in India to recognize the problems of the sanitation workers dealing with human faecal matter and has concretized a comprehensive plan of action to address their safety by ushering in a policy of zero tolerance to deaths among the sanitation workers. The story of Babuli Naik exemplifies the transformation the state policy has brought about in his life.

Babuli Naik, a Core Sanitation Worker (CSW) in Bhubaneswar, was like any other such worker whose days were spent in dangerous, dark, filthy ditches and sewers from dawn to dusk. The locals identified him by his filthy attire, cleaning tools on his shoulder and his dishevelled look. A pushover with an intense hunger for survival, he epitomized the typical worker struggling to eke out a living and was destined to live a life of penury, hardship, deprivation and disease in a dingy corner on the outskirts of the city.

In recent years, the state is advancing on multiple fronts on a scale far wider and deeper than originally planned thanks to accurate diagnosis of problems, appropriate policy orientation and a carefully structured collection of programmes aimed at not just inclusive and sustainable growth but more importantly dismantling the pernicious hold of societal mores which symbolize inequity and untouchability. The Government of Odisha approached the problem by acknowledging the contribution of people like Babuli to the society, prioritized their need for safety and security, and reached out with targeted intervention by implementing a dedicated scheme, namely 'Garima'.

The ripple of revolution was in the form of Garima, a path-breaking government initiative, designed to empower CSWs. The scheme, designed to empower the CSWs, has already hogged national headlines, attracting policy makers across the nation. No wonder, Babuli has left behind his bitter past, become financially sound, decently attired and working as a modern CSW. A positive outcome of this drive that gives hope is the change in his attitude to cleanliness as a common good.

Overview

Geographical information

Country: India

City: Bhubaneswar

City population: 1,200,000



Problem

- Sanitation workers face numerous challenges, including significant occupational health and safety risks due to frequent exposure to waste and confined spaces, weak legal protections, limited standard operating procedures and a lack of law enforcement.
- Financial insecurity is prevalent, as many sanitation workers come from impoverished backgrounds, have irregular employment in the informal sector and miss out on the benefits available to organized sector employees.
- Social issues such as discrimination and stigma, often associated with caste, perpetuate a cycle of poverty, limited access to education, employment and healthcare, particularly affecting the children of sanitation workers.

Solution

- Odisha Government launched the 'Garima' scheme on 11th September, focusing on sanitation workers' safety, security and dignity.
- The scheme focuses on institutionalizing safe sanitation practices, enhancing socio-economic security for sanitation workers and their families, and implementing government interventions to reform structures that were previously inaccessible due to poverty, illiteracy, lack of training and low earnings.
- The approach is multifaceted, involving institutional development, policy/strategy formulation, and the creation of Standard Operating Procedures, frameworks, and regulations.

Problem

At the tender age of 13, Babuli was pushed into the harsh realities of life, owing to the sudden and untimely death of his father. From a school student in Nayagarh district, he was compelled to drop out and migrate to Bhubaneswar to earn a living. With the passage of time, he made his mark in the sewerage cleaning and maintenance business spearheaded by his uncle and brother, a part of the Public Health Engineering Department. However, despite his hard work, Babuli and his family faced a strong social stigma due to the nature of his work.

Ten years later, when Babuli returned to his hometown, hoping to unite with his family and contribute to agricultural activities, he faced the bitter reality. The social stigma and neglect attached to his work in Bhubaneswar only intensified. It was then that Babuli decided again to return to sanitation work, this time with the Water Corporation of Odisha (WATCO). Despite spending almost four decades in this field, the question remains - Has there been any improvement in the societal view of sanitation work?

The privations faced by Babuli over the years are an eye opener. Babuli and his co-workers were regularly exposed to human waste material, frequently without the necessary protective gear or safety devices, resulting in an array of health risks and diseases at times with fatal consequences. These workers also face hazards from toxic gases such as ammonia, carbon monoxide and sulphur dioxide present in septic tanks and sewers. Exposure to dangerous gases can induce loss of consciousness or even sometimes prove lethal. In the context of India, there's an alarming statistics that approximately every two days, a sanitation worker succumbs to these hazardous conditions. Further, numerous workers continuously suffer from infections and injuries, potentially reducing their life expectancy. Notably, apart from these challenges, they are yet to get appropriate recognition from various governmental institutions that do not even acknowledge their existence or the crucial role they play.

Babuli represents the millions of Indians who are condemned to live a life of deprivation and penury in the slums with attendant privations. His youth was one of unequal struggle for survival: his adulthood was a bigger struggle for survival of his family with both phases of life washed away leaving behind memories of bitterness, exploitation and abuse. The challenge on hand is big: to mainstream the lives of this invisible mass with social and financial security empowering them by removing the blemish of caste and class disadvantages and restoring their dignity.

Solution

The Government of Odisha has adopted a focused approach to the problems of safety, security and dignity of the sanitation workers and has launched a dedicated scheme namely 'Garima' in September.2020. The scheme prioritizes institutionalization of safe sanitation practice and socio-economic security of the sanitation workers and their families and provides for a number of government interventions to reform the existing structures which were inaccessible to them because of their poverty, illiteracy, lack of training and unremunerative earnings.

Garima acknowledges that high skills are needed to work in such a hazardous work environment. Therefore, the scheme assigned the work undertaken by Core Sanitation Worker (CSWs) in highly skilled and skilled categories which resulted in direct increase of wages in 45% for highly skilled and 27% for skilled workers. In addition, Babuli and his fellow sanitation workers also receive a 'Risk & Hardship Allowance' at 15% of their daily wage under the highly skilled category which is the first award of its kind in the country.

CSWs are also provided with health and life insurance, financial assistance for housing and two wheelers and mandatory personal protective equipment and safety devices. The social security net also gives financial assistance in the case of accidents, injury and disability. Above all, the scheme provides free education for children of CSWs as an investment on their future to enable them to break the vicious circle of poverty.

All the private sanitation service organizations (PSSOs) operating in the city are licensed by complying with all the norm and conditions for ensuring safety and dignity of the core sanitation workers.

The scheme is also unique in its approach by bringing different legislations, guidelines and benefits from various agencies under a single umbrella of Garima. Another unique feature of the scheme is that apart from providing various welfare measures, it leverages other welfares schemes being implemented by various other departments of government to the benefit of the sanitation workers.

Constructing Garima Gruhas (Garima Halls) and dedicating it to CSWs has been another distinctive step of the state towards these workers who have been deprived of all the basic amenities at the workplace. It has been designed to have function such as workstations and rest stations for the workers to rest. All the Garima Gruhas are provided with a rest room, washroom, changing room and locker room as shown in Figure 2.



Figure 2 – Changing room at the Garima Gruhas. Source: H&UDD.

Today, Babuli warmly recalls, ‘Garima fuelled my dreams with practicality and power. Not only armed me with lucrative skills but also, it instilled a sense of confidence with a new identity in me.’ He is no longer merely Babuli the ‘sewer worker’, but a certified ‘Sewer Entry Professional’. Further he has climbed to the ranks, carrying proudly the designation of ‘Garima Supervisor’ and a crucial responsibility to ensure his assigned area is clean and safe. Figure 3 shows Babuli and his colleagues.



Figure 3 – Babuli and his colleagues. Source: H&UDD.

Lessons learned

Today, the CSWs, once considered the lowest rung of the societal ladder, are standing tall, establishing their importance. Their understanding and reputation have improved in society. From being seen as mere cleaners who waded through waste, they transformed into specialized individuals, carrying out the crucial task of maintaining cleanliness and hygiene in the city. Babuli reflects, 'The changes in our roles are more profound than the titles on our badges.' Indeed, the scheme Garima ignites a revolutionary change in the attitudes of CSWs, extending to officials and citizens involved in the process, a transformation resonating within every structure they previously felt estranged from.

Babuli experienced a powerful shift in perception. He reflected, 'With the help of our own Garima Scheme, I received intensive training on using machines and safety devices for cleaning and maintaining sewer lines. I am now not only a certified 'Sewer Entry Professional' but also a 'Garima Supervisor', supervising the safe cleaning of my designated area.

The journey of Babuli, from the stage of a struggling child forced into a thankless job to the level of a respected supervisor overseeing sanitation, is a testament to endurance and the power of change. The societal evolution regarding sanitation work, through the Garima Scheme, carved a path of safety and dignity for Babuli and many others like him. The journey wasn't easy, riddled with hardships, but the outcome witnessed societal change, fostering a safer, cleaner and a more respectful environment for sanitation workers.

Useful links

<https://urbanodisha.gov.in/garima.aspx>

<https://urbanodisha.gov.in/pdf/GARIMA-Scheme-Booklet.pdf>

Further reading and references

- <https://www.downtoearth.org.in/blog/governance/sanitation-workers-deserve-an-inclusive-ecosystem-here-are-5-best-practices-for-their-safety-and-dignity-88540>
- <https://swachhindia.ndtv.com/odisha-government-launches-garima-welfare-scheme-for-sanitation-workers-49932/>
- <https://www.businessworld.in/article/Odisha-Govt-launches-GARIMA-welfare-scheme-for-sanitation-workers/11-09-2020-319463/>

- <https://newsroomodisha.com/core-sanitation-workers-in-bhubaneswar-get-garima-id-cards-on-world-environment-day/>
- <https://tathya.in/watco-on-garima-mode/>

About the author

G. Mathi Vathanan is presently serving as the Principal Secretary in the Housing & Urban Development Department under the Odisha Government. Known for his creative thoughts, strategic plans and inspiring leadership in development, Vathanan spearheads urban development efforts in Odisha, particularly in introducing innovative non-sewered sanitation solutions. His visionary ideas paved the way for the revolutionary Garima scheme's inception. Consequently, propelling Odisha on a path of global recognition in the water and sanitation field.

Durgesh Nandini Sahoo is the Additional Secretary to Government & Nodal Officer for Implementation of Garima Scheme. She has been passionate and dedicated towards implementing significant schemes and working persistently to bring about ostensible changes.

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About the institution / organisation

Housing & Urban Development Department is Government of Odisha's nodal department to ensure proper and planned growth of cities and towns with adequate infrastructure, amenities and services provided to citizens through Urban Local Bodies and parastatal agencies. <https://urbanodisha.gov.in/>



About the IWA Inclusive Urban Sanitation Initiative

IWA's Inclusive Urban Sanitation initiative responds to a huge and growing public need - safe sanitation in combination with access to safe drinking water and hygiene underpins good health. The aim of this initiative is reshaping the global urban sanitation agenda by focusing on inclusive sanitation service goals--and the service systems required to achieve them - rather than the traditional singular focus on expanding sewer networks and treatment works. This forms part of IWA's larger agenda to promote inclusive, resilient, water-wise, and sanitation-secure cities.

About the Inclusive Urban Sanitation Stories

The Inclusive Urban Sanitation stories are documenting some of the policies, practices, and approaches that demonstrate how stakeholders especially those in urban areas (e.g., public sector, operators, academics, regulators, and other key actors) are taking part or contributing to Sustainable Development Goal 6 which require water and sanitation concepts and norms to look beyond technology and the usual focus on building infrastructure. Increased focus is on safety, inclusion, environment, public health, and multiple technology solutions tailored to different geographies and socio-economic contexts for building climate-resilient cities. The stories aim to inspire urban stakeholders to discuss ways for advancing inclusive urban sanitation, especially in low- and middle-income countries.