

## GARLANDING THE SANITATION WORKERS: GLORIFICATION OF LABOR, CASTE AND INDIAN PSYCHE

**Narender Kumar**

*Assistant Professor, Department of English, Ram Lal Anand College, University of Delhi.*

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### Abstract

*After independence India has made a good progress in many areas such as academia. Indians succeeded to make their presence felt at the best academic institutes in the world and they have been popularly recognized for their contribution. But one thing which could not change even after independence and constitutional provisions is the notion of caste. This is the notion prevalent everywhere and gets reflected in everyday social. This paper makes an attempt to understand two incidents: first, a video, in which some people are garlanding the sanitation workers, got viral on social media in April 2020 during the lockdown; second, the celebrities such as Salman Khan, Shipa Shetty, cricketer Yuvraj Singh and Sonakshi Sinha made comments on a Dalit caste known as Bhangi. The first incident makes an impression that caste is not an issue in the modern India. This paper contests this impression and makes an effort to reveal how caste functions between the sanitation workers and the people who garlanded the sanitation workers. The study also attempts to understand the psyche of the people who made casteist comments.*

**Keywords:** *Caste, independence, Punjab, Sanitation, Politics, Labor, Psyche.*



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### Introduction:

In last April 2020 during the lockdown a video got viral on social media. The video creates a scene in which the local residents garlanded the sanitation workers with the garland of Indian currency. In the video the residents are shown patting the back of the cleaners. The residents also addressed the cleaners as yodha (fighters). This was the video many people enjoyed watching and praised the large heartedness of the people who garlanded the sanitation workers. Many people asked the question; did you notice any sense of caste among the residents who garlanded the cleaners? And many others claim that caste is not an issue in the

modern India and people respect labor and hard work. And that's what the residents did while garlanding the cleaners.

Of course, we do not notice any sense of caste in this video. But do we know who are these people working as sanitation workers? This is the question which can help us to understand how does caste function between the residents and the sanitation workers? Most of the sanitation workers in Punjab and other Indian states come from the Bhangi/Chuhra/Valmiki caste. This is the caste which rests at the bottom of caste hierarchy and face most humiliated caste practice. In the name of caste system, Bhangi caste has been doing the work of cleaning since time immemorial. Earlier they used to work as cleaners in the villages but later on, with the development of urban places in India a large number of them migrated to urban places. The mushrooming mandis/market places offered them opportunities to work as cleaners. They caught these opportunities as they find them attractive in terms of material benefits and limited working hours (Prashad, 2000).

This was the time when nationalist movement against the British Raj was making its presence felt amongst the masses and the Indian National Congress was struggling to cope with the emerging Dalit leadership as Dalits had begun to claim a separate electorate rights for themselves. The Indian intelligentsia was familiar with the consequences of separate electorate rights for the Dalits. And that was the reason the Indian National Congress made all efforts to accommodate the emerging Dalit leadership. The Congress leadership brought many reforms such as the inclusion of the so called untouchables in the schools, and colleges. For example, in Punjab the Dalits were allowed to enroll in the D. A. V. Schools and Colleges (Ram, 1983). Since in Punjab Mangoo Ram Mugowalia has started a Dalit movement known as Ad Dharm (1926) under which he wanted to unite all untouchable castes and certain extent he succeeded to organize them on a common platform (Madhopuri, 2001). The rising unity amongst the Dalits became an issue of concern for the nationalist as the Dalits demanded a separate identity in the next census report. This rising unity amongst the Dalits was broken with the introduction of a new identity—Valmiki--- for one of the major untouchable caste in Punjab. High rate of illiteracy in this caste favors the dominant discourse ideologues to propagate the new identity amongst them. And they began to celebrate themselves as Valmikis.

This new identity was propagated with such expertise that the community could not realize the subordination. As the community got intoxicated with the notion of same origin

and could not understand where the community has been placed in social order. The new identity did work the way the ideologues wanted; as the people began to identify themselves as valmiki which made them the essential part of the dominant religion. The very impact of this new identity was noticed in Ad Dharm movement as most of the local leaders who come from the community separated themselves from the movement (Juergensmeyer, 2009). And this new name Valmiki has created identity crisis between Chuhra and Chamar; of course, earlier also they were two separate castes but both were outside the four folds of caste system. But now Chuhra caste considers itself closer to the dominant religion while the Chamar caste asserts a separate identity. So the new name Valmiki has widened the gap between them and education is the only means which can help to reduce the gap.

### **Indian Psyche and the Popular Image of the caste**

The popular image of the caste generally gets reflected in the comments people make intentionally or unintentionally. Recently four celebrities Salman Khan, Shilpa Shetty, Yuvraj Singh, and Sonakshi Sinha made comments on a Dalit community earlier known Bhangi/Chuhra but currently recognized itself as Valmiki. Three of these celebrities, Salman, Shilpa and Sonakshi, are Bollywood actors and last one, a retired international cricketer. If we look at their individual comment we notice that Salman Khan on a TV channel during a promotion campaign for his movie Tiger Zinda Hai said that “I look like a Bhangi in this dance step (News18, 26<sup>th</sup> December 2017).” Shilpa Shetty in an interview said that, “at home I look like a Bhangi (The Hindu, 24<sup>th</sup> December 2017).” Sonakshi Sinha in an interview said, “I won’t purposely dress like a bhangi (The Economic Times, 5<sup>th</sup> August 2019).” Then the cricketer Yuvraj Singh in an Instagram live conversation with a fellow cricketer Rohit Sharma said, “Did you see the video, this bhangi fellow Yuz posted? (The Statesman, 4<sup>th</sup> June 2020).”

If we look at the individual statement of the celebrities it goes like this Salman says, “I look like a Bhangi in this dance step.” Though Salman trained in Islam which does not believe in caste system but his socio-cultural training, under which he observes the Bhangi community cleaning the filth of the whole country, plays a significant role in creating the popular image of the community. In terms of socio-economic status Bhangi caste comes at the bottom even amongst the Dalits. The worst socio-economic status, high rate of illiteracy, most humiliated work create the popular image of Bhangi---a worthless fellow who does not

have any talent to do things other than cleaning. This is the image stored there in the dominant Indian psyche and time and again gets reflected.

Shilpa and Sonakshi's comments reflect the dominant caste women's perspective towards the women of the Bhangi caste. Being privileged both Shilpa and Sonakshi observe the Bhangi women cleaning the streets, roads and working as manual scavenger. Of course, all women from the caste do not work as cleaners. The perception of Bhangi being cleaner, safaiwala, jmadaris based on the traditional image of the Bhangi caste. Dalit personal narratives, such as *Untouchable: Autobiography of an Indian Outcaste* (1951), *Joothan* (1999), *Mera Jeevan Sangharsh* (1983), *Untold Story of a Bhangi Vice-Chancellor* (2001), discuss the traditional image as well as the efforts Bhangi caste is making to change the image. Omprakash Valmiki in his autobiography *Joothan* reflects on the traditional image stored in the dominant psyche:

One woman throwing a one rupee note at the hand of Hirm Singh said, "Arey, your son-in-law is very smart, what does he do?"

Hirm's mother-in-law enthusiastically said, "He is studying. . . has completed his eighth standard exams. The inquiring woman looked at Hirm with surprising eyes. I was standing beside him. Looking at me from top to bottom the woman spoke in the same tune, "You also study?"

I nodded my head, "yes."

"You, in which class?"

"Just completed my 9<sup>th</sup> standard exams."

Her eyes were full of surprise, "but you look like younger than him?"

"Yes, I am younger than him."

She spoke after sometime, "Barla is the village of Taggas?"

"Yes," I said.

"Chuhras' children also go to study in Madarsa." She was surprised.

"Whichever standard you study . . . you will remain a Chuhra." She expressed her frustration and went inside. (Valmiki, 1997)

So this is the notion that whatever a Chuhra/Bhangi studies his/her identity will remain the same which means whether a Chuhra becomes a professor, doctor, engineer or vice-chancellor he will remain a Chuhra/Bhangi. The notion of caste does not recognize any quality in the person born in the Chuhra/Bhangi caste. And this notion, ideologically nurtured

in the name of religion, is stored in the Indian psyche and gets reflected everywhere in everyday social. The victims hardly resist to humiliation as it is done in the name of socio-religious practice. The personal narratives of Hazari, Shyamlal, Bakhshi Ram, and Yashica Dutt expose how they have been humiliated in the name of caste.

The very specificity of the comments, mentioned earlier, lies in the word “Bhangi” and this is the word which we need to understand in historical context. Bhangi is the name given to a Dalit community which does work as cleaner, manual scavenger and other cleaning works considered dirty in Indian social order. The community does not do work of cleaning willingly rather the work has been imposed in the name of caste system. And the community has been doing the work of cleaning since time immemorial. Bhangi caste, being involved with the work of cleaning and scavenging, is identified as polluted and filthy. The whole society observes them cleaning the filth of the whole country. This social observation generates a sense of hatred against the cleaners as the observers believe that these people are born to clean the dirt and do not have capabilities to perform any other responsible work. The image of Bhangi-- a worthless fellow--is a socio-religious construction and slowly it became the essential part of the Indian psyche. Whenever anyone from the dominant caste does not perform well then s/he taunts saying that s/he does perform like a Bhangi or s/he looks like a Bhangi.

These statements remind me one national conference organized at Punjab University, Chandigarh. I and another speaker made presentation on the caste question in Punjab and then the session was opened for question and discussion. One of the professors asked another speaker that “Na . . . t what is wrong if we call the cleaner woman as Chuhri. We do it traditionally as when in the morning the cleaner woman comes we say that Chuhri has come.” This is how a professor who teaches humanities at the University addresses a person who does work as cleaner. The professor did not notice anything wrong by addressing the cleaner with her caste name. Though the use of caste names are prohibited under the Scheduled Castes and the Scheduled Tribes (Prevention of Atrocities) Act, 1989 but in everyday social caste names are as common as used be in in colonial and pre-colonial time.

The people, who made comments about the Bhangi, are well educated and understand how such comments hurt the sentiments of a particular community. But in India people feel proud when they humiliate others in the name of caste. Of course, later on when the victims protest they apologize and such apology is the part of the strategy; as they know the apology

can protect them from any legal trial in the court of law. Otherwise also, people who make such comments hardly get punished and that is why this is a never ending practice.

These two incidents: first, garlanding the sanitation workers and second, making the casteist comments are contradictory. As first incident makes the impression that people respects labor without paying any attention to the caste. Though as mentioned earlier this is a false impression, as caste still functions between the sanitation workers and the people who garlanded the sanitation workers. Garlanding the cleaners is not a new thing as there is a long history of the glorification of labor in the Indian political context. Gandhi did work for the cleaners and stayed in their locality in Delhi. And there are many others who did follow Gandhi's political principles but did such glorification of labor bring any change in the Indian psyche? Second incident answers this question in negative which means people still believe in the traditional image and not ready to recognize any talent amongst the cleaner community.

#### **Conclusion:**

There is hardly any hope that the people will change their heads and stop making casteist comments. But there is an alternative available to the victims and that alternative is to learn from another Dalit caste known as Chamars. This is the caste which has made its presence felt in every sphere of life and very much visible in the Indian political scenario. Chuhra/Bhangi/Valmiki must learn from the caste Chamar. Bhangi/Chuhra/Valmiki is the second largest Dalit community after Chamar but there is lack of education, leadership, and the organized struggle amongst them. If they pay attention to these weaknesses, then perhaps, they may succeed to make some progress and may contribute to Dalit political leadership which can bring structural change in the Indian social order.

#### **Note:**

In this article I use the caste names such as Bhangi, Chuhra, Valmiki, Chamar and untouchable for analysis purpose, not to hurt the sentiment of any community or caste.

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