

Inclusive urban development: narrative of urban cleaner community in Bangladesh

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Photo: A participant among pit emptier writing their development needs in group work, Pit Emptier Convention, Dhaka, 7th December 2016

Emergence of urban cleaners

History revealed that there was a special group of people who were unlikely other artisans like smiths, weavers worked for cleaning sewerage and drainage system in one of the old urban civilizations at *Harappa* and *Mohenjo daro* (K, Antonova et al., 1986). They were mostly slaved. We are now under the charter of the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights where every man has equal rights to choose their profession and lead a decent life with dignity and equality.

Methodology: Both primary and secondary data were used in this paper. Primary data was collected through group discussions, national level workshops of urban cleaners, interviews during the year 2015 to 2016. Besides, unstructured participants observations, routine monitoring work and case studies were also conducted by the project staff of Practical Action in two urban areas e.g. Satkhira and Faridpur Sadar municipalities of Bangladesh.

Urban cleaner is a caste or class?

Urban history in Bangladesh belongs to that Indus civilization as we had also thousands years old urban centre name '*Pundra nagar*' (Pundra town). Therefore we could say that that city had also existence of the cleaner '*class*', special artisan community who are culturally called '*Harijan*'. *I would not say that they are owned wholly a class dynamic but close to a caste system (Dumont, Louis, 1970). Among the cleaners society in Bangladesh there are broadly two communities based on their religious identity like Hindu or harijan community and Muslim sweeper community. In hindu religious system where society is segregated by four professional groups or four caste system where the harijan community is out of that four caste*

system and treated as schedule caste. Mahatma Gandhi, a famous Indian Political leader for renowned of his non-violence movement and also social reformist worked for the rights of those group of people who did not have minimum dignity as human being. He tried to bring them in the main stream *hindu* society with giving them a new nomenclature that is beyond of thousands year long established four caste system. He called them *harijan* (hari means most honourable) and that was officially declared as called scheduled. However in literally there is no existence of any social stratification in Islam but in practice unlike hindu religion a kind of lower status communes are belonged in Bangladesh who are exploited from many ways due to their lower status profession like '*Kulu*' (traditionally oil producer), '*Jhula*' (weavers) and '*hajam*' (circumcision) etc. (Karim,1980). Now a days many people from rural peasants society who were withered away from their land and traditional livelihoods due to natural disasters mainly are forced to take shelter at urban and peri urban areas. This poor people who do not have skills to fit with urban economy are also engaging this type of lower skills based employment. Who are facing multifaceted marginalization like economic, social, and cultural. Therefore it is more challenging to address this kind of heterogeneity in nature of poverty with merely dominant per capita income base poverty reduction strategy what we applied at rural context.

Political economy of the cleaners

In statistically this cleaner society is not small in size and they are not also extinct. Available statistics show that there are around 150 thousands harijan in Bangladesh (Born with inequality, www.manusher.org). If we include muslim cleaners in this profession then the rate will be higher and gradually it is increasing with the increasing trend of urbanization. There are around 532 urban centres including big and small municipalities in Bangladesh that consist around 35% of total population and contribute 80% of national GDP (MHHDC, 2014). Experts opined that country has been rapidly urbanizing and it will reach 50% of its total population by the year 2030. In each day urban waste generation is 13,333 MT per day and per capita ½ kg per day(Waste Concern, 2005). This study was conducted in 2005 when urban centres were 512 and total urban population was around 25% that increased to 35% in 2016 so waste generation could be around 20,000 MT per day . For a liveable city and healthy urbanization we need cleaning services with improved and modernized way where a professional group with skills and adequate logistics are needed. We can not expect this improved scenario at now but we need to have a priority plan to take the country and our economy at the stage of middle income countries where per capita gross national income starts from US\$1026 to \$

12475. How do we expect this by ignoring around two million people where whose services are required daily to foster our urban economy and production. Are they being exploited through structural process? How dominant ideology of the society and state take into account economically their work? Is it less economic valuable compare to other artisans among urban classes? I think there is no way to ignore the cost of negligence to proper sanitation cleanliness as a study



The Human Waste, conducted by Water Aid and Tear Fund (Water Aid, shows that in developing countries 80% of diseases is due to poor sanitation. People suffering from water borne diseases occupy half of the world's hospital bed. Poor sanitation caused of increase diseases burden, number of hospitalization, daily work loss,

children lower participation in schools and long term effect on health like anaemia and stunted of growth. The report reveals that school sanitation program increases 11% enrolment of girls annually. My daughter who is 12 years old she admitted in a new school after her graduation from class five to six. In the beginning she reported to me that her school toilet were not clean properly so she did not want to continue that school. Later on she repeatedly reported to her class teachers and she is now fine with her present school. So we can realize how the social and economic value of this cleaning works!

Why cleaners are neglected from development priority? Bangladesh constitution confirms equal rights of every citizen under the article 19(1)'state will attempt to ensure equal; opportunities for all the citizens" and also article 20(1) where every citizens rights are agreed with same value regardless of their cast e, class, religion and sex. But in practice what we see that communities like cleaners are deprived from many ways. They do not have equal access to basic citizen services let alone to give them privilege as a community of lagging behind. A recent study (Ainoon et al., 2016) among harijan of northern part of Bangladesh (2016) shows that, " in general, the common feeling among the Dalit is that they have always been looked down upon by the mainstream/dominant groups who tend to avoid Dalit in public spaces". It also reveals that 'Dalit women are the 'marginalized among the marginalized'. Social Safety Nets are the major instrument of Bangladesh government to reduce poverty and hunger. The allocation of total safety nets are mostly rural biased where total safety net packages more than three times higher in rural areas compare to urban(House Hold Income and Expenditure Survey , 2010). Girls from extreme poor communities live in urban slums are not entitled to school stipend program as metropolitan cities are excluded from that Safety net policy. FSM Net Work in Bangladesh organized a national convention of Pit emptier in 7th December 2016 in Dhaka. Around 92 pit emptier from 20 cities and municipalities attended in that convention and participated in a day long workshop. This was really an exceptional day for the development workers as well as for the most marginalized people like pit emptier. They identified plenty of eye awakening issues what we need to know if we really want to change the world! Table below disclose their pains and deprivation and way forward.

Table: Extent of deprivation of cleaners

| Health & Security | Equity | Dignity | Fair income |
|--|---|---|--|
| "We want equal attention in health care centres when we become sick" | " We want to play together with all the children" | "We are avoided in social events even though we attend we are humiliated" | "What we earn monthly that is enough for twenty days and rest of the days we have to live with borrow from informal money lenders with high interest of repayment" |

Where is the solution? Deputy Secretary of United Nations General Jan Eliasson commented that 'No- one left behind' is the underlying moral code of the 2030 agenda for sustainable development. He also emphasized that people who are hardest to reach should be given priority. Practical Action Bangladesh have implemented a four year long (2012-2016) multi-country (Bangladesh, Nepal,Sri Lanka) project named Integrated urban development (IUD)-2 that focused participatory planning for inclusive urban governance. The findings of this project are very encouraging to inspire to development thinkers and policy makers. This project followed a participatory approaches to include urban cleaners

in the urban development process with drive to demonstrate a pro poor urban governance. Narrative of the project beneficiaries illustrates that they were enlighten by understanding democratic process within themselves and the way how to identify problem and solution through participatory planning process-“We can arrange election in our SIC reformation, exercise and enjoy democracy”, Rumpa Begum, Slum Improvement Committee, Faridpur. We learnt that to create an enabling environment for interaction between two classes of people (Elite and proletariat) improvement of city governance is essential. But at the same time we need to focus on how to improve skills and reduce the health and safety risks are also important for transforming any economic sector. If we reveal history of human society dominant class has always occupy the advance technology. So creating access to technology of this proletariat class as means of their income, change may happens (Photo: Customize Gulpher for emptying pit). Empirical evidences revealed that this is possible and that has been proved by the cleaners’ community of the Faridpur municipality. In the beginning of this year 2016 Urban and Energy Service Program of Practical Action, Bangladesh organized annual program impact review and learning workshop. One of the



main stakeholders of this program was city /municipality government. Anisur Rahman Chowdhury, an honorable counsellor of the Faridpur Municipality commented in one of the learning session of that review workshop that how he evaluated Practical Action engagement in his city development. He commented, “Earlier I myself never allow a *mathor* (Cleaner), to stand my side *but when I found that they are now use machines for emptying pit, they do not get down into inside of the pit, I found there was no any bad smell with their body. They are doing like other mechanic or civil engineering works. So I sit with them in a same table at tea stall*”. I think this is the way to change social perspective and change

the lives of the most disadvantages communities in the most advance areas in any country. This has also been recommended by Mr. ABM Khurshed Alam, Chairman, National Skills Development Council. He recommended that there was needed to available modern tools and machineries for cleaning and collecting urban wastages and sludge and by this way their status could be improve. He also suggested for there was needed to introduce certification of cleaners with arrangement of skills enhancement programs on different trades on urban cleaning and sludge management and this way they would have professionalism.

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