

The Great Indian Sanitation Scam. Upper castes take lowgrade government jobs, keep the benefits and subcontract the work

Proxy work is rampant in sanitation jobs. ‘They want our jobs but they don’t want to do our jobs.’

Thursday 12 December 2024, by [MISRA Shubhangi](#) (Date first published: 11 November 2024).

Jodhpur: Pushpa Devi has been working for 30 years in a job that isn’t hers. It brings only half the salary and is a daily reminder of centuries-old discrimination.

Each dawn, the 50-year-old walks 5 kilometres to Jodhpur’s iconic clock tower in rubber slippers. Before the market opens, she sweeps leaves, clears stray chip packets, and cleans up animal faeces. Yet, she’s not on the payroll of the Jodhpur Nagar Nigam, which is responsible for sanitation in this area. Pushpa is a *badli*, ‘2 by 2’, or proxy worker—hired under the table to do someone else’s official job.

For decades, *badli* work has kept Valmiki sanitation workers across the country stuck in low-paid, insecure jobs. But now, they face a double whammy in Rajasthan. In 2018, the state government introduced a [reservation-based system](#) for sanitation jobs, setting quotas for the general category, OBC, SC/ST, and others. Valmikis, who have been doing this work for generations, were overlooked. And now, members of socially dominant castes are taking the government jobs of sweepers but not doing the actual work.

“The general category is snatching our jobs. For us, this work is a *majboori* (compulsion)—we have to feed our kids and have no option to work anywhere else. They want our jobs but they don’t want to *do* our jobs,” Pushpa said.

As a *badli*, she misses out on government pay, benefits, and security.

“If I had a government job, I’d make at least Rs 20,000 a month, medical insurance, and pension. I have been forced to work for Rs 5,000 a month instead,” she added.

This modern twist on old caste prejudice keeps the most marginalised at the bottom. The reservation policy, meant to uplift, is defeating affirmative action and being exploited.

Valmikis don’t know who they’re replacing, but they mostly fill general caste positions

- Prakash Singh Vidrohi, president of the Akhil Bharatiya Dalit Mahasabha

Across India, proxy, ‘badli’, or ‘ewaj’ work is rampant in sanitation jobs. Many suspect that the government jobs that Valmikis filled for years are now being increasingly bagged by other

groups—from ‘general’ category applicants to other Dalit sub-castes. But that doesn’t mean the historical stigma attached to the work is fading.

There’s a rush for *safai karamchari* jobs with government benefits, but few want to do the work. Earlier this year, nearly 46,000 graduates and postgraduates [applied](#) for sanitation jobs through Haryana Kaushal Rozgar Nigam, a portal for government contract jobs. But Haryana’s Valmiki sanitation workers told ThePrint that dominant-caste sanitation workers do not pick up the broom and work. They are just subcontracting the work to Valmikis. In 2017, the Delhi High Court [ordered](#) photo-based attendance of sanitation workers to tackle the proxy problem, and in 2019, at least 30 government *safai karamcharis* in Punjab’s Abohar were [found](#) sub-contracting their work.

In August, Valmiki workers in Jaipur went on a two-week strike, demanding priority in hiring. They claim that general-category hires enlist Valmikis to cover their shifts for minimal pay, or use ‘connections’ to transfer to different roles.

Officials acknowledge that the problem runs deep—but it’s not limited to any region.

“The problem of proxy work in sanitation jobs is systemic and deeply rooted, and it is not just Rajasthan where it happens,” said Dr T Shubhamangala, municipal commissioner of Jodhpur Nagar Nigam. “Currently, there are more than 1,000 proxy workers in Jodhpur Nagar Nigam itself, and the corporation is trying its best to curb the problem with the help of biometric attendance.”

Bezwada Wilson, convener of the Safai Karmachari Andolan (SKA) and a Magsaysay Award winner, said that everyone should be out cleaning the streets.

“In the name of democratisation of jobs, exploitation of workers is happening,” Wilson told ThePrint. “It’s not like we don’t want the jobs to open for dominant castes, everyone should be out here cleaning the streets. But dominant castes are willing to take up jobs but are not willing to work. This has to change, local bodies should ensure proxy work doesn’t happen.” Wilson emphasised that the issue of proxy work affects “each and every state”.

“Valmikis are forced to work sanitation jobs on sublet contracts for fraction of the salary they deserve,” he added.

With no national data on *badli* workers, and the rise of contract labour, it’s hard to gauge the scale. Government sanitation jobs have [sharply declined](#) between 2004 and 2021, with most such posts now outsourced to contractors, according to an analysis in the *Economic and Political Weekly*. Sweeper positions in the Union government dropped from 1.26 lakh in 2003 to only 44,000 in 2021. During the same period, the proportion of Dalits in these posts fell from over 58 per cent to just above 32 per cent.

Yet, Valmikis still do a lion’s share of the work.

“The Valmiki-Mehtar community has been doing cleaning work traditionally, and will continue to do so,” said Sardar Prakash Singh Vidrohi, president of the Akhil Bharatiya Dalit Mahasabha. “Other communities like Bishnois, Chaudhrys, Brahmins, OBCs—all of them are employed as sanitation workers, but they don’t ever do this work. Sanitation work is always looked at with disgust.”

Proxy hiring is never direct. Instead, sanitation inspectors visit Valmiki settlements to recruit proxies. Actual hires who are unwilling to do sanitation work give a ‘cut’ of their salary to the inspector.

All work, no pay

For years, Pushpa has swept the roads of Jodhpur, keeping tourist spots clean and picking up rubbish in front of the homes of the *bade log* (rich people). Yet, she's never once set foot inside one of these well-kept houses.

"They don't want the Mehtar *samaj* anywhere near them," Pushpa said from her home in Valmiki Basti. "Even when we work outside their houses, they ask us to maintain a distance."

Pushpa's house—a shanty built with stones taken from the Aravallis—is painted a faded yellow, with cramped rooms carved out for her growing family. Some rooms don't even have roofs. Meals for her family of ten are cooked on a *chulha*.

The sanitation quota may be a recent policy, but exploitation isn't new to her. Pushpa claims has been working for the Jodhpur municipality for over 30 years even though she has never been able to get a job with them. She's angry and frustrated, but also helpless.

"I applied for a job so many times, spent thousands on application fees, even tried the lottery system (introduced in 2012) but I haven't been lucky. There's not a single government job in my house," she said.

Pushpa added that her unofficial recruitment was through a sanitation inspector—a worker promoted to a supervisory role. On paper, these inspectors receive no added benefits, but in practice, they're accepted as ward leaders. Proxy hiring is never direct. Instead, sanitation inspectors visit Valmiki settlements to recruit proxies. Actual hires who are unwilling to do sanitation work give a 'cut' of their salary to the inspector. In return, the inspectors find proxy workers and mark attendance for dominant and non-Valmiki caste staff.

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-T Shubhamangala, IAS officer & Jodhpur municipal commissioner

"Valmikis don't know who they're replacing, but they mostly fill general caste positions," said activist Vidrohi, himself a retired sanitation worker who served with the railways.

Resistance to sanitation work, however, is not just an 'upper-caste' phenomenon. Even among Scheduled Castes, certain groups refuse to do this work.

"Members of Meghwal, Meena, and other SC and OBC castes won't do sanitation work. It's reserved for Valmikis, specifically the Mehtar caste," Vidrohi added.

Members of Jodhpur's association of sanitation inspectors told ThePrint that proxies are a fixture in every ward. All upper-caste sanitation employees either hire proxies or transfer to desk jobs—computer operator, record keeper, peon.

In Valmiki Basti, many of Pushpa's neighbours work as proxies, some earning as little as Rs 200 a day. One of them, 32-year-old Pooja, has been a proxy for five years and brings home just Rs 3,000 a month. If these workers were formally employed, they would have earned at least 20,000 a month.

To make ends meet, some supplement their income by cleaning school washrooms or taking up odd jobs during the wedding season. But opportunities are scarce, and an inter-generational cycle of deprivation continues.

“I have been working as a sanitation worker for over 30 years, but I haven’t been able to educate my children, so they have also now fallen into the same trap,” Pushpa said. Her two sons, who previously worked as proxies, are now contract garbage truck drivers for the Jodhpur Nagar Nigam.

There’s a clear gender divide in sanitation roles. Women are mostly assigned to sweeping streets, while men handle sewer cleaning and driving. Men are also promoted to the roles of *jamadaars* and sanitation inspectors, unlike women.

At home too, Pushpa’s needs come last. Not only does she work for a pittance because others see her job as beneath them, but she manages all household chores before and after her shift. Her husband can’t work because of a chronic illness.

“I wake up at 4 in the morning and sleep at midnight,” Pushpa said.

“My body breaks by the end of the day after holding such large brooms and pulling the cart with garbage in it. I don’t do anything but work the entire day.”

In September, the Department of Local Self-Government in Jaipur issued a directive instructing municipal commissioners to take action against employees outsourcing their duties. However, rather than targeting those who exploit the system, the onus seems to fall on the Valmikis working as proxies

An app to sweep out proxies

The Jodhpur municipal corporation is trying a new fix for proxy work: an app to track who’s really on the job.

“We have developed the Municipal Corporation Jodhpur South App through which we take daily attendance of people to ensure the person originally hired for the job is working,” said municipal commissioner Shubhamangala. “My team is constantly keeping a watch, but it is difficult to sift through thousands of faces. We have identified 3-4 cases so far and are taking necessary disciplinary measures.”

However, locating official employees who’ve outsourced their roles to *badli* workers remains a challenge.

“The workforce is extremely big, we have thousands of workers, and identifying who has hired people for proxies is difficult,” Shubhamangala said.

Another hurdle is the silence from those affected.

“I am aware that such resistance is there (to do sanitation work) but nobody has come to complain to me personally,” she added.

In September, the Department of Local Self-Government in Jaipur issued a directive—seen by ThePrint—to all municipal bodies in Rajasthan, instructing commissioners to take action against employees outsourcing their duties, even suggesting filing FIRs.

The general category doesn't want to work. They just want to draw home a salary. They hope *kachi naukri pakki ho jaye* (contract work becomes full time). They consider this work dirty and beneath them

-a sanitation inspector in Haryana

However, rather than targeting those who exploit the system, the onus seems to fall on the Valmikis working as proxies. This is because it's easier to notice when a worker in a ward keeps changing than to track who should actually be there.

"We have thought of registering, but for now complaints can be registered only against the Valmikis who are working as proxies," Shubhamangala said. "We want to identify our staff first."

It has not been specified under which section of the Bharatiya Nyay Sahita any proceedings will be initiated.

'Caste discrimination' in contract work

Most [sanitation jobs](#) in India are informal or contract-based. Congress leader and Dalit activist Rajendra Pal Gautam told ThePrint that after the fourth pay commission was implemented in 2002, government jobs in several states were contractualised, including Haryana.

But the contract system has made the *badli* problem even more brazen than in state-controlled setups.

"The contractors are all upper caste and hire their acquaintances as sanitation workers. They pay Valmikis only 30-40 per cent of the salaries," said Rajkumar, a member of the Safai Karmachari Andolan, speaking to ThePrint in Panipat.

In Haryana, many proxy workers refused to speak to ThePrint out of fear of losing their jobs. One sanitation inspector, speaking anonymously, estimated that 20-25 per cent of contract workers belong to the general category.

"The general category doesn't want to work. They just want to draw home a salary. They hope *kachi naukri pakki ho jaye* (contract work becomes full time). They consider this work dirty and beneath them," the inspector said. "With contract work, caste atrocities on the job have increased, people are regularly threatened for jobs. Proxy workers don't even get any money for treatment if injured on the job."

Valmikis have to reach for work at 7 am sharp, while general category *safai karamcharis* reach at 10 am, get their attendance, and leave for other jobs. Because they don't work on the streets, we have to pick up the slack and have an additional workload

-Ranveer, union leader of Samalkha sanitation workers.

Scepticism abounds about the recent rush of highly educated candidates for sanitation jobs in Haryana.

"A lot of these graduates, especially from the upper caste categories, will just find proxies to work for them if they get the job," Rajkumar said.

Many workers say caste discrimination is entrenched in every aspect of their work—such as being denied proper protective gear when working in open drains, despite the severe risks.

Jobs, but no progress

Many young sanitation workers are deeply bitter about a system they say is rigged against them—even when they get bona fide jobs.

“We don’t get promotions ever, but general category workers who join get promoted to ‘supervisors’ even though they haven’t done a day of sanitation work in their life,” said Azaad, a sanitation worker in Samalkha, Haryana. “I have a diploma as a sanitary inspector, but here I am—still working as a sweeper.”

Similar frustrations are expressed in Jodhpur by Valmiki workers in formalised jobs.

“We are sanitation workers by birth, yet we are never promoted,” said Raju Barasa, a *jamaadar* with the Jodhpur municipal corporation. “We can work all our life and will retire as sanitation workers only. This is the truth. Other castes take our jobs, then sit over us as supervisors, giving orders.”

Many workers say caste discrimination is entrenched in every aspect of their work—such as being denied proper protective gear when working in open drains, despite the severe risks. Just last month, three sanitation workers in Rajasthan’s Sikar district [died of asphyxiation](#) while cleaning a blocked sewage line.

Sanitation workers also allege they face exclusion from the Nagar Nigam offices, only being allowed entry when specifically summoned.

“Valmikis have to reach for work at 7 am sharp, while general category *safai karamcharis* reach at 10 am, get their attendance, and leave for other jobs. Because they don’t work on the streets, we have to pick up the slack and have an additional workload,” said Ranveer, union leader of Samalkha sanitation workers.

Sources within the Jodhpur municipal corporation allege that officials across departments often benefit from the proxy system.

The great job swap

Mahendra Choudhary was hired as a *safai karamchhari* in 2018, but instead of sweeping the streets of Jodhpur’s Ward No 6, where he was assigned, he shuffles files as a peon in the Additional District Magistrate’s office.

Choudhary insists there’s no foul play involved and that he just acted on directives from above.

“I was deputed here on orders from the municipal commissioner. I earn my living by doing a hard day’s work,” he told ThePrint at the ADM office. “I have no problem with doing sanitation work. I think there’s dignity in all labour. If I am sent back to my ward, I’ll happily go.”

General category sanitation workers are often deputed at the houses of judges, IAS, and RAS officers, other than government buildings such as the municipal corporation and the collectorate. They don’t want the system in place to be disrupted

-Jodhpur sanitation inspector

Choudhary isn't the only general category worker who has been deputed to work in another department. Sources in the Jodhpur collectorate alleged that close to 40 "sanitation workers" have been deployed in various positions within the building to work as computer operators or peons.

This practice persists despite repeated attempts by Rajasthan's Local Self-Government Department to rein it in. Since 2012, the department has issued multiple orders to ensure that all hired *safai karamcharis* are actually doing their jobs, but to no avail.

In 2021, a letter from the department's director instructed various municipal corporations and councils to return all sanitation workers to their original posts with immediate effect. The letter, seen by ThePrint, noted that similar instructions had been issued in 2012, 2018, and 2020, but directions weren't followed.

Another letter in September 2024, sent by director Kumar Pal Gautam, reiterated these instructions, directing all commissioners to ensure all sanitation workers were sent back to their original postings. This time, the letter also threatened disciplinary action against such workers and the officials who failed to enforce the orders.

Nevertheless, "sanitation" workers continue to work on deputation in various offices, including within the municipal corporation building.

The municipal commissioner, however, brushed this aside, insisting that the numbers were "miniscule". Officials also usually plead ignorance on sanitation workers deputed to their departments.

Manoj Verma, the health inspector at Jodhpur Nagar Nigam, said he didn't know that his assistant Chandraprakash Gehlot was originally hired as a sanitation worker. Despite repeated calls from Verma over two hours, Gehlot didn't show up at the corporation.

"We (officers) have been discussing the best way to ensure these workers go back to their original place of work. We have started the process of identifying such workers and sending them back to their wards. But it is taking time," Verma told ThePrint.

But sources within the municipal corporation allege that officials across departments often benefit from the proxy system.

"General category sanitation workers are often deputed at the houses of judges, IAS, and RAS officers, other than government buildings such as the municipal corporation and the collectorate. They don't want the system in place to be disrupted," said a sanitation inspector on the condition of anonymity.

A senior official in the Jodhpur Municipal Corporation confirmed this: "It's difficult to get these people out of judges' houses," he said with a smile.

A new bind

Valmiki sanitation workers ended their strike on 6 August, but it hasn't changed much on the ground. Workers like Pushpa are still waiting for the day they finally land a government job, but for now, the odds are stacked against them.

Following the protests, the Rajasthan government issued a corrigendum stating that only applicants with a recommendation letter and documented work experience at the Nagar Nigam can apply for new sanitation jobs. For Valmikiis like Pushpa, who have toiled unofficially for years, this is yet another barrier.

“Sanitation work is the traditional job society has assigned to Valmikiis. An experience letter for Valmikiis shouldn’t be a necessity,” Vidrohi said.

Last week, sanitation workers in [Udaipurwati](#) as well as [Jaipur](#) launched a fresh protest over the experience certificate requirement and other demands. But until protests like these lead to real change, *safai karamcharis* like Pushpa face an erasure of their work and identity.

“I have worked in the Nagar Nigam all my life, but if I go and ask for a recommendation letter, I am told nobody can write it on paper that I am a *safai karamchari* here. My years of work have no value,” she said as she put a cloth over her mouth and resumed sweeping.

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