

Sacred duty, caste and ‘untouchability’

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Historically, Korean society has valued the concept of 'chen-jik' (천직, 天職, てんしよく), which is found in other East Asian societies as well. 'Chen' means 'God', while 'jik' is 'occupation'; the occupation given from God. When an individual is endowed with a special talent and puts all her effort and energy in making the most of this talent, this is seen as her chen-jik. Artists, musical prodigies and Olympic athletes are thus all following their chen-jik. Apart from this elevated meaning, chen-jik also has another connotation: a low and humble occupation (written with a different Chinese character, 賤職). The definition of such an occupation has varied with time and culture, manifesting itself more as a mindset than any physical work.

In contrast to this East Asian situation, Hindu society—dominated by the caste system—believes that *everyone* has chen-jik. Based on the purity of descent, every caste and sub-caste is granted its own occupation, considered a duty given by the Gods. According to modern India's founding father, Mahatma Gandhi,

Caste has nothing to do with religion. It is a custom whose origin I do not know and do not need to know for the satisfaction of my spiritual hunger...The law of Varna teaches us that each one of us earns our bread by following the ancestral calling. It defines not our rights but our duties. It also follows that there is no calling too low and none too high. All are good, lawful and absolutely equal in status [Quoted in Rajendra Kalidas Wimala Goonesekere, 'Prevention of discrimination and protection of indigenous peoples and minorities', Working paper submitted to the Sub-Commission on the Promotion and Protection of Human Rights, 14 June 2001, p. 5].

A Brahmin priest in the documentary *India untouched* (2007), said every caste has to fulfill its own duty and cannot undertake any other duty, which would be against the laws of God. This division of labor means that he, as a Brahmin, is born to pray, while a Chamar (one of the Dalit communities known as 'untouchable') is born to repair leather shoes. The Chamars are trained to repair shoes since they are children (and are not allowed to do anything else) while Brahmins do not need to do anything other than pray.

And so it seems that everyone living in a Hindu society has their own chen-jik. Individuals belonging to the upper caste are of the belief that their occupation is a sacred duty given by God. This duty has two parts. One part is an individual onus to perform one's designated occupation. The second part is a group responsibility to separate from other castes. This latter part, taken to its extreme, is evident in the practice of 'untouchability'. In this way, the caste system embodies both the sacred and inferior forms of chen-jik.

Valmiki, carrying out the lowest duty on earth

A year after her husband died, Jeena sweeps the street everyday in the Viramgam town of Ahmedabad district, Gujarat. She was offered the job by the Viramgam government as compensation for her husband's death. Her husband Gopal was employed as a casual sanitary worker for the town under the Nirmal Gujarat Program. Gopal's job was to collect garbage from the streets and gutters and dispose of them in a tractor.

[photo 1: Jeena collecting garbage]

Gopal usually worked eight hours a day but was sometimes asked to work during the night as well. He was called to do extra work on the night of 2 August 2007, when it had been raining hard during the day. Cleaning gutters in such weather was hazardous work. Gopal could not refuse to work however, since he belonged to the Valmiki community, whose designated occupation is to manually clean dirt, including human excreta. His refusal could lead to beatings and abuse by upper caste officials. In fact, workers protesting against the night shift after a sanitary worker was injured the night before, were threatened with dismissal.

Gopal began feeling ill on his way home from work on August 3. He was rushed to the hospital by his family, but died on the way. The doctor who conducted the autopsy said the reason of death was unknown; Jeena was aware that no doctor would say anything in favor of a Valmiki.

Although Jeena received some monetary compensation from the local government and the ruling political party, she has to make her living as a manual scavenger in place of her husband, having three school-going children to take care of. Does the Viramgam municipality know that prior to Jeena's husband, two other manual scavengers had also died in this area? Is the municipality aware that manual scavenging is prohibited under the Employment of Manual Scavengers and Construction of Dry Latrines (Prohibition) Act (1993)? Or is it that the laws of India need not apply to the lowest denominators of the caste system, but simply exist in thick law books?

Despite the horrors of her work, Jeena feels relatively lucky as she does not work the night shift like her husband. On the other hand, she faces 'untouchability' and discrimination against women:

I have to bring my own cleaning instruments like dustpan or broom, as I am not provided with anything for cleaning the street and gutter. I work for eight hours a day and have only two days off per month. My husband was paid 100 rupees on a daily basis but I am paid 2500 rupees monthly, which is less than a male worker's wage. And yet, there are more female scavengers than male scavengers. The supervisor checks attendance every morning. He asked us to pay even for attendance card. He is very rude and tough to women. After checking attendance under the hot sunshine for half an hour, we drink water separately from other community people.

Jeena did not talk much about her life in front of her relatives at home, but when she was on her own she said, "I wish I could have my own house only living with my children." She looked exhausted by the past and fearful of her future, now that she is one of Gujarat's 64,000 manual scavengers.

[photo 2: Jush, her family and their home]

In another district of Gujarat, Jush has also lost her husband. She was also offered a job as a sanitary worker in place of her husband by the Vadodara Municipal Corporation.

On 26 May 2008, Jush's husband Harish and another worker Nagin died while working inside a manhole at night. The working conditions of manual scavengers are mostly the same everywhere in India. Harish and Nagin were asked to block the main sewer pipe in a manhole to assist in a valve repair at night, which was extra work after their regular hours. Both of them were about 30 feet inside the manhole without wearing any protective equipment or even clothes.

[photo3]

No worker wears protective gear while doing manual scavenging in India, simply because they are not provided with any by their employers—government institutions. Are all district governments too poor to provide proper equipment to their workers? Recalling the documentary *Lesser Humans* (1998), I imagine Harish and Nagin working in the manhole, soaked from head to toe. In ten years, there has been no improvement in the working conditions of this community, and they continue to have no other choice of livelihood.

No mother wants her son to die in the same manner as his father. Jush forcefully said, "I will not allow my son to work the same as his father, never."

"The mayor of Vadodara promised me to provide different job for my son other than sanitary work," she added.

The mayor visited Jush immediately after her husband's death and gave her three lakhs (USD 7000) as compensation. The mayor himself belongs to the Valmiki community, and expressed his concern about the two sanitary workers' deaths, noting that this was the first incident since he took office. However, it is the 11th death of a sanitary worker within the Vadodara district in recent times. After all these deaths, workers are still manually working inside manholes, which violates the Gujarat high court order of 2006 prohibiting manual work in manholes.

There are 600 Valmiki families in the slum where Jush lives in Vadodara city, 400 of whom are engaged in

manual scavenging. When the father/husband dies, the district government gives his job to his son or wife. If Jush had not refused the offer of sanitary work for her son in place of her deceased husband, her son would do the same work and might also be found dead in a manhole like his father.

[photo6: Valmiki slum where Jush lives]

Previously, the Valmikis were derogatorily called ‘Banghis’. Discrimination and exclusion in a society have three dimensions—institutional, customary (attitudinal) and cognizant. The last dimension lasts much longer than the first two dimensions. Changing the community’s name from Banghi to Valmiki does not lead to a change in people’s cognition. Unless discrimination and exclusion are changed in all three dimensions, the Valmiki is merely the appeased ‘Banghi’ of 21st century India. Similarly, calling a Dalit ‘Harijan’ (son of God), does not make people change their perception of Dalits. Who then, is responsible for the reproduction of ‘Banghis’?

‘Untouchability’ and the duty against ‘pollution’

“What I say through my tongue is law,” said the village head to Natu Dahya, when he attended his first village council meeting after being elected as a village council member in 2007. The Marida village of Kehda district, Gujarat is controlled by a small clique of persons who follow only the laws of their tongues, rather than any laws of justice.

[photo 7] Natu Dahya

When the first meeting of village council was held, I tried to sit on a chair. It was just to sit on a chair but I knew that no village council member from Dalit community had ever sat on a chair during a council meeting till then. I thought I should try it. As soon as I sat on a chair, all others were looking at me as if it was unacceptable. After the meeting, the village head came to me and said, “Why are you Banghi sitting on a chair? When you sit on a chair, the chair becomes untouchable... Wash it.” I had to wash it with water and sit on the floor.

[photo 8]

At the second meeting, Natu was ordered not to sit on a chair by two unofficial council members (representing their wives, who were the elected members). Natu was also given snacks separately from other village council members. When Natu tried to propose his views for the village development at the third meeting, he was told by the village head, “You do not have a right to talk about it. I decide what we do.”

Natu’s fight against ‘untouchability’ began before being elected to the village council. Previously, he had fought against upper caste persons who had encroached upon village land belonging to Dalits. Since then he has been seen as a leader of the Dalit community.

Apart from Dalits, Natu is also supported by some Thakors who belong to the Other Backward Classes (OBC). These Thakors are excluded from the economically and politically predominant Thakors in the village, living on the fringe of the Thakor community. They often visit Natu to talk about village problems, and even invite him to wedding ceremonies. While amongst them there is no duty to ‘purify the polluted’, the rest of the village—like any other rural village in Gujarat—is divided by caste and sub-caste; a spatial configuration of ‘untouchability’. Dalits are not allowed to enter the temple for instance, and there is no school for Dalit children near the Dalit community. The upper caste reside in the village center, surrounded by plentiful agricultural land for a comfortable living.

[photo 9]

On several occasions, the local police station refused to register Natu’s complaints against the village head and other village council members. Even after successfully filing a complaint, Natu faced further ‘untouchability’ in court. During the trial, sessions judge Mr Sethi Punjabi said to Natu,

I am a Punjabi by caste. Even if someone called me 'Sikh' instead of 'Punjabi', I would not consider it as an abuse... It is normal, normal in the country. I also feel so. Why did you file a complaint? In my chamber, I used to have two sets of paper plates to offer snacks. I offer different plates to different people. In doing so, nothing is illegal and there are not any forms of discrimination. It is a personal choice. You should not take it as discrimination... When I was in Junagadh district, posted at Junagadh Court, I took a cigarette only when it was offered by a Patel (upper caste). I did not take cigarettes offered by other low castes.

Even for a judge in India's modern criminal justice system, it is not the law enacted by the state that is primary, but the law of tongues and customs. Although Natu has lodged a complaint against the judge, he is unsure when—if—he can expect equality before the court.

Such perverse beliefs regarding sacred duties and untouchability will continue to be quietly challenged, slowly but surely, by persons such as Jeena, Jush or Natu. Also known as 'broken people', these Dalit individuals are like the earth's grass, as described in the following poem.

The Grass

by Kim Soo-young

(This was Kim's last poem, written after the 4.19 (19 April 1960) people's revolution against the South Korean military dictatorship.)

Grass, lying down
Swaying from East wind carrying heavy rains
Grass, laid down
Burst out crying
Crying more as it is cloudy
Laid down again

Grass, lying down
Faster than wind, lying down
Faster than wind, crying out
Before the wind comes, standing up

Getting cloudy, grass lying down
Touching the ankle
Touching under the feet
Lying down after wind
Standing up before wind though
Crying after wind
Laughing before wind though
Getting cloudy, grassroots lying down