

Pune Community Toilets In Deep Shit

The main focus of the PMC toilet drive is to reconstruct old defunct toilet blocks. But the process of demolishing the old blocks is not as straightforward and neutral as it might seem... with all that stinking muck lurking in the aqua-privy tank, someone's got to get in and get the sludge out.

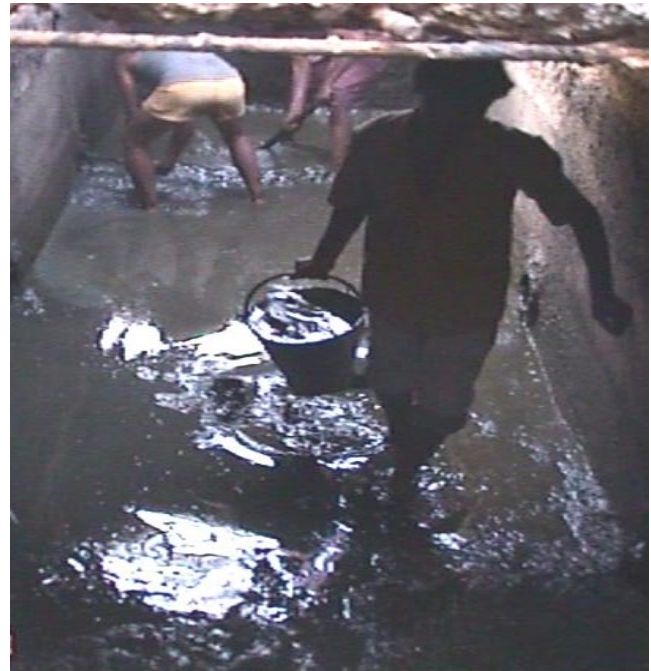
Traditionally, the people employed to deal with sewage are bhangis or safai kamgars (who are dalits, but often looked down on by other dalits). These were the people who would collect the nightsoil in the villages, and carry it away on their heads to dispose of it. This practice continues in many areas today.



That's an old aqua-privy after the superstructure has been removed. This is what the safai kamgars had to deal with.

Since Independence, there has been a constant effort to liberate scavengers from carrying this muck on their heads ... and this *has* gone a long way. Septic tanks and aqua-privies do mean that the solid waste doesn't have to be carried away daily, as in the traditional system.

But there's no evidence that urbanisation has improved the lot of safai kamgars. In many ways work they are employed to do in the urban context is worse than the traditional role of the bhangis in the villages.



It's the safai kamgars who are employed to get into the city sewers to unblock them, which means descending into a manhole and completely submerging themselves in the sewage.

In this project, once the superstructure and slab of the old blocks had been taken apart, the old tank of partially decomposed and recent raw sewage was revealed. The stink is as bad as you can imagine. It's at this point that safai kamgars were brought in, to clear it all out. No-one else will touch it, but safai kamgars traditionally dealt with shit, and are expected to continue.



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When we in Shelter Associates came to demolishing old PMC toilet blocks in Pune, we understood that there were sullage vans which would literally suck out the solids. But it turned out that the PMC sullage vans suck out the liquids, but can't deal with the solids.

It seemed at first that the only way to clean out the tanks was by getting safai kamgars to do the job.



PMC sullage vans can only suck out the liquids

This meant that fellow human beings had to get into the tank, stand in other people's raw sewage, and shovel it out.

This is the method that all the NGOs used at first to clear the tanks.

We tried to provide some relief by putting **Dr. Bhavalkar's bio-sanitisers** and phenyl down the pans a couple of days prior to clearance. This eases the stink.



But the fact remained that it still had to be cleaned out by hand. **There's no way to justify this practice. It can only be described as inhumane.**

This is one disturbing issue that arose during the first few months of the PMC's toilet construction drive.

It was partly resolved by the introduction of earthmoving vehicles for demolitions .

Shelter Associates/
Baandhani, 2001

