

Our unsung, exploited climate warriors

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“Why should only the rich live well? Don’t our children have a right to a good life? Electricity, gas, vegetables, house rent – everything is becoming more expensive. Our salary is so low that we can’t afford to run our homes. We will not pick up the broom till our demands are met. We are even ready to die here, but we want a fair hearing.” These are the voices of the pourakarmikas, during their recent protest in Freedom Park, agitating for the right to work with waste, but with dignity. To live a decent life, just like the rest of us do.

Every day, Bengaluru generates 6 million kilograms of waste. This is collected by the pourakarmikas, who clean the streets, collect our sanitary and medical waste, and who worked in one of the most dangerous situations, at the frontline, during Covid times. Their work was, and continues to remain, invisible to us while we carry on with the more urgent business of living our daily lives – apart from occasional spurts of empathy where we might bang a thali, or light a lamp, ostensibly to honour them as ‘frontline workers.’

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Waste is mismanaged in many ways. Despite the increase in waste generation, the budget BBMP allocated to waste management shrank from Rs 1,622 crore in the previous year to Rs 1,469 crore in 2022-23. Many of the 26,000+ pourakarmikas who work in Bengaluru have been sweeping the streets for decades, but because they are on contract, they lack basic benefits. The budget allocated for their salaries in 2022-23 has also been reduced by about Rs 85 crore, while their workload continues to increase, thanks to the increased consumption of plastic and packaging material that we take for granted when we order a meal or groceries online.

And yet, as they went on strike, the provisions they asked for were quite basic, essential for a decent workplace environment. One day off work every week, maternity leave, and sick leave. Access to toilets – important when you think of the fact that most of these workers are women, often with children in tow.

Even more basic, they asked for access to clean drinking water. Let that sink in for a minute. Cleaning the streets is physically demanding, dehydrating. How many times have you seen a pourakarmika carrying a dirty plastic bottle and rapping at the gate to ask someone to fill the bottle for them? And how many times have you seen the home-owner, or security guard, turning them away? These are daily humiliations they face on the streets – along with worse abuse. As the fundamental IPD Salappa Committee report, published in 1976, pointed out, pourakarmikas are almost always Dalit, and the majority are women – but their supervisors are almost always non-Dalit, and male. The physical and mental abuse they face, on a daily basis, is worse than most of us can imagine. And yet they continue to sweep our streets, and clean our waste.

The demands the pourakarmikas made – which the government has now promised to grant in three months – are far from new. In 2017, the Labour Department issued a notice to contractors to hike their minimum wage from Rs 7,000 a month to Rs 14,800, but the workers complain that the hike in wages never reached them, and was pocketed by intermediaries. They sometimes pay for brooms themselves, picking up garbage with their bare hands. When they inevitably fall sick, they have to pay for treatment out of their meagre wages. After a hard life of even harder work, they are summarily dismissed when they turn 60 without a pension, usually in ill health.

We cannot talk of adapting to climate change, or keeping the city free from epidemics and pandemics, or hope to live a decent life – a good life – without these heroes and heroines who keep us safe. But these voices are rarely heard, or even thought of in fancy think-tank meetings on the future of the city, or online public consultations on urban resilience. The least we can do is to ensure that they get a basic pay and basic workplace rights. But we need to do so much more.

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