

How floods push Guwahati's sanitation workers to the brink

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ASSAM FLOODS

They play a key role in reducing urban flooding and cleaning up after but work with little support in dangerous conditions.



A safai karamchari works in a waste-filled drain in Colony 3. | Rishiraj Sen

This year, Assam has been devastated by excess rainfall that caused one of the worst floods in recent memory. At least 195 people have died in the disaster, which upturned the lives of an estimated 90 lakh residents. The disaster has highlighted the vulnerability of marginalised communities to such extreme weather events.

Among those who bear the brunt of such disasters are the safai karamcharis or sanitation workers, who are front-line responders to urban floods.

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Safai karamcharis are tasked with ensuring cleaning urban areas and sanitation and drainage facilities across the city. Given that poor drainage infrastructure is among the primary causes of urban flooding, the work obligations of safai karamcharis increase manifold during such incidents.

Over two weeks between May and June in and around Guwahati, the Visual Storyboard team at the Centre for New Economics Studies interviewed more than 30 sanitation workers in an attempt to understand how their lives had been impacted by the floods.

Among the workers interviewed in Guwahati, 21.05% were employed by the government, 10.53% were semi-government workers while 68% were hired by private entities on contractual basis.

Guwahati's sanitation workforce is made up of those from the Basfore sub-caste, who are categorised as ati-shudras by the caste order that ascribes "unclean and dirty occupations" to those at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

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The team's field ethnographers visited four colonies in Guwahati that are predominantly occupied by the Basfore caste: Uzanbazar, Rupnagar, and two locations simply known as Colony 3 and Colony 4.

Frequent eviction notices and visits from government officials have made the colony residents averse to giving out any information, even about their dire living conditions.

Working through the floods

Safai karamcharis are paid per month based on completing their tasks, and are forced to report to work even during heavy floods. Wage cuts are frequent when workers do not show up.

They live in constant fear of being laid off due to the contractual nature of their jobs. While several places were shut in view of the floods, none of the 30 respondents had a day off.

D* Basfore, a sanitation worker from Colony 4, said there is a waterfall behind their homes so when it floods, water enters the premises. "The land falls too," he said, referring to the landslides that occur in wet weather.

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Safai karamcharis are required to work at multiple locations across Guwahati. Navigating the submerged streets is hazardous. M* Basfore said the floods compound the problems of sanitation workers. "...There's water everywhere – in the colony, on the roads," he said. "We have more problems commuting, more problems in finishing tasks."

Since the people they work for do not supply them proper cleaning equipment, they have to cobble together make-shift tools from the waste, several respondents said.



Garbage lined entryway to Colony 4. Credit: Rishiraj Sen.

“Equipment means we take a tin sheet and hammer it to make it foldable,” said Ak* Basfore, a former government employee. “We put a stick into it and then use that contraption to clean. The government only gives us two brooms made up of coconut leaves, and nothing else.”

During floods, workers struggle to unclog drains and wash off the sludge – which is crucial for reducing the water levels.

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To ensure that they earn enough money to meet their basic requirements, members of the Basfore community are forced to take up jobs on the side. A* and S*, two workers said that if they do not take up additional work their “livelihoods will end”.

“They [employers] tell us to do a lot of other jobs and when we protest they tell us to stop coming from tomorrow. They say they will call someone else for work,” said S Basfore.

Poor pay, no support

Sanitation workers hired by government entities in Guwahati have slightly better pay than others. The average monthly income of the safai karamcharis interviewed is Rs 7,326. But the starting salary in government jobs reported by the team’s sample is Rs 8,000 per month and increments are based on seniority.

“My brother earns Rs 21,700 because his job is permanent with the government,” Me* Basfore said,

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Respondents reported that their salaries could touch Rs 38,000 per month by the time they reach retirement age, but only after two to three decades of relentless work.

One of the respondents, B Singh, said, earnings vary from Rs 500-Rs 600 on some days to Rs 1,000 when there is more work during the floods. “Sometimes I prefer the flood season because at least I get work and paid then,” said Singh.

Health, education

The colonies in which the sanitation workers rlive are made up of narrow lanes lined with waste and open drains. They have only one source of clean water for more than 50 households. Broken pipelines and stagnant water result in poor hygiene and mosquito infestations.

Families pay around Rs 1,000-2,000 per month for electricity while clean drinking water tanks costs Rs 25 per litre.

The hilly location of Colonies 3 and 4 means the terrain is inaccessible to drinking water trucks. It is difficult for emergency relief to reach the area after the landslides that frequent the area.

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V Basfore, a contractual sanitation worker, said children fall sick due to exposure to chilly winds and dirty water during the floods. “If they get sick, where do we take them?” He said in case of emergencies, ambulance access to the colonies is difficult.

Poor nutrition and minimal meals is a result of low wages and inadequate access to government schemes. While sanitation workers are eligible for government support through their ration cards and below poverty level cards, they find it difficult to enrol themselves for these schemes due to poor literacy.



Children and other members of the community outside the government school in Colony 3. Credit: Rishiraj Sen.

Respondents reported having to give up eating three full meals per day to pay for the medical emergencies that are inevitable at work and during the floods.

The Basfores are stereotyped as heavy drinkers. To numb their senses to enter the filthy drains, many sanitation workers say they drink heavily. Apart from the short to long-term health problems due to excessive alcohol consumption, respondents also reported losing their spouses to alcohol poisoning.

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Low wages and almost non-existent savings mean many are pushed into taking loans to make ends meet. Seventy-eight per cent of the respondents said they had taken loans from formal and informal sources – 81.25% borrowed from individuals or relatives, 12.5% from banks and 6.25% reported a combination of both.

High interest rates – touching 20% – result in many safai karamcharis ending up in debt traps. Debt and low wages hampers access to education. The interviews indicated that most sanitation workers had not had the opportunity to receive formal education while those who did had managed to pass their matriculation.

Women more vulnerable

Most women in the families of safai karamcharis are employed as domestic workers. Those from non-Dalit backgrounds do not take up work involving the cleaning of toilets.

On normal days, household chores occupy them after work. But during rain and floods, keeping water out of the house is an added task. With neighbourhoods flooded with muddy water, many walk long distances carrying buckets and pots to collect clean water.



A woman of Uzanbazar on her way to collect water. Credit: Rishiraj Sen.

Bi* Basfore, a widow in her 40s, has been working as safai karamchari for most of her life. She said her own home was completely flooded so she was in her mother's home for now. "I do not get any off days from work whatsoever – not even one day," she said. "I have to steer through the overflowing waters."

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Women also juggle several jobs to support their families. According to the minimum wage mandate in Assam, unskilled workers are supposed to earn at least Rs 7,200 per month. But at least 54.54% of women in the sample earn less than this figure.

A better future

Many of the problems reported by our respondents in Guwahati are common to safai karmacharis across India, but the annual floods in Assam highlight the added challenges they grapple with.

Forming unions could play an important role in advancing their interests. The government should address their concerns and recognise the vital role they play in helping combat urban floods – not just in Guwahati, but across the country.

**The names of respondents have been changed to protect their identity*

This story was produced as part of the Visual Storyboard initiative of the Centre for New Economics Studies, Jindal School of Liberal Arts and Humanities, OP Jindal Global University.

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For more information on this story, please see the photo essay [here](#) and the video essays [here](#).



Women at the colony in Uzanbazar. Credit: Rishiraj Sen.

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Opinion

With 90 million people going hungry, is Pakistan already on the path to becoming the next Sri Lanka?

The government has reassured the public that things won't get as bad as in the island nation.



Asif Hassan/AFP

Will Pakistan actually default if the International Monetary Fund, Saudi Arabia and other donors do not disburse a few billion dollars? Some are sounding the alarm bell, but others – including the government – insist that our economic ship is not about to sink anytime soon. They tell us we will not become Sri Lanka.

It is indeed unlikely that the state will declare bankruptcy because our patrons – Western, Islamic kingdoms and the Chinese – may prefer that we don't plunge headlong into chaos. In any case, there is little relief on the horizon from the lethal combination of spiralling inflation and the fallout of the monsoon rains. Reportedly 90 million Pakistanis are already going hungry.

But still we are supposed to be reassured that it won't get as bad as Sri Lanka. In making such rhetorical statements, the political and intellectual mainstream is deliberately glossing over another defining feature of Pakistan's social and political life that resembles Sri Lanka. Like that island country, Pakistan too is an ethnically majoritarian state which continues to treat its peripheral ethnic-nations like colonial subjects....

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How cartoonists made Bengal laugh and challenged the status quo in the years after Independence

An interview with Samit Das, the curator of an exhibition titled 'Cartoons In Bengal 1950-1970: Freedom of Speech and Socio-Political Artistic Voice'.



[Saila Narayan Chakraborty](#)

What social and political debates tickled Bengal's funny bone in the two decades after Independence? That was the focus of an exhibition titled "[Cartoons In Bengal 1950-1970: Freedom of Speech and Socio-Political Artistic Voice](#)", held at the India International Centre, New Delhi from July 8 to 15 to showcase the state's cartoon history.

"When we laugh at local matters, it is a way of being vocal about these issues, about engaging with them," said Samit Das, the curator of the show. "This is also how these issues become a global concern. The wit and ideas that are involved in creating cartoons, I believe, have always been present in Indians. It is certainly not a new phenomenon."

The works on display, Das said, traced the major political and social shifts in Bengal during that period.

They also turned a critical eye on newly-independent India as it grappled with remnants of its colonial past while nurturing the dreams of millions, as seen by cartoonists from Bengal. From the Partition to Kashmir conflict, cartoonists from the state had a unique perspective on events....

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The party can ignore gendered violence in the home and workplace while reinforcing heterosexuality and classed, caste-based, and religious social hierarchies.



Hindu Yuva Vahini members in their office in Unnao in Uttar Pradesh in this photograph from 2017. | Cathal McNaughton/Reuters

In May 2014, in his first speech to the Indian Parliament, Prime Minister Narendra Modi demanded that politicians work together to protect women and girls from violence. Modi reiterated this message in his first Independence Day address, criticising parents for failing to discipline their boys.

Since 2014, state governments run by the Bharatiya Janata Party have taken measures to curtail street harassment through special policing units. Why police street harassment?

By focusing on street harassment and regulating it through a heavily politicised police force, the BJP advances several political goals.

First, the party appeals to women voters by addressing pressing concerns related to mobility and public safety. Second, it focuses attention on the violence women face from unknown men, as opposed to the violence they face from men they know in their homes and workplaces. Finally, it mobilises an institution – the police – that the party can easily control, allowing BJP politicians and affiliated organisations the ability to identify individual instances of harassment and oversee punishments....

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BOOK EXCERPT

How are professionals managing their maternity breaks and careers? A new book asks the question

An excerpt from 'Equal Yet Different: Career Catalysts for the Professional Woman', by Anita Bhogle.



There is absolutely no doubt that a maternity break is the single most challenging stage in a woman's career. A pregnancy is typically announced and celebrated in society as 'good news'. It is the time when women are pampered and looked after. For working women, however, it could well mean that your teams and organisations see you as physically and emotionally vulnerable, compromised in terms of productivity, and incapacitated when it comes to high-pressure projects or travel.

As a senior HR head told me, in order to counter this, many women try very hard to be active and work right till they go into labour, just to prove that pregnancy doesn't mean you are out of action. They want to swing back into the thick of things right after their delivery, in line with the highly controversial recommendation of Marissa Mayer, the former CEO of Yahoo.

You might have read about how she went to work after just two weeks of delivering a baby. The HR head made it clear that the company did nothing to pressure its employees to return early and that it was every woman's individual choice how late into her pregnancy she wanted to work. ...

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