



Endless Filth: The Saga of the Bhangis

Mari Marcel Thekaekara

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"In the rainy season it is really bad. Water mixes with the shit and when we carry it on our heads, it drips from the basket onto our clothes, our bodies, our faces. When I return home, I find it difficult to eat food sometimes. The smell never gets out of my clothes, my hair. But then in summer there is often no water to wash your hands before eating. It is difficult to say which is worse." This is a telling investigation and indictment of India's lack of resolve over the past 100 years to get rid of manual scavenging and transportation of human excrement. Since Gandhi raised the question of untouchability in 1901 there have been reports, recommendations, a National Commission in 1994 and allocation of funds for rehabilitation of the Bhangis, but so far little has changed. Almost every state government denies the existence of the problem. The author suggests that there is a silent and shameful opposition in India to the eradication of untouchability. The Bhangis are trapped in a system ordained by the caste structure which impedes rehabilitation and movement into alternative work. Can attitudes change, or will the dignity, justice and equality enshrined in the Constitution remain no nearer for the Bhangis than it was in 1947?



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