



HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION OF PAKISTAN

# INVISIBLE LIVES

STORIES FROM PAKISTAN'S  
SANITATION WORKERS

SHAKEEL PATHAN LABOUR STUDIES SERIES

# INVISIBLE LIVES

## STORIES FROM PAKISTAN'S SANITATION WORKERS

Shakeel Pathan Labour Studies Series



Human Rights Commission of Pakistan

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Human Rights Commission of Pakistan  
Aiwan-e-Jamhooir  
107 Tipu Block, New Garden Town  
Lahore 54600  
T: +92 42 3583 8341, 3586 4994, 3586 9969  
E: [hrcp@hrcp-web.org](mailto:hrcp@hrcp-web.org)  
[www.hrcp-web.org](http://www.hrcp-web.org)

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# WORK ABOVE ALL ELSE

By Adnan Rehmat

‘*Nizaaam ee meray jaiyaan dey kbilaaf aay* [the system is rigged against the likes of me].’ Shahbaz Masih is bitter at not having a government job in the twenty-sixth year of his working life, including the last 13 as a sanitation worker.

He is 51 years old. Deep crow’s-feet line the sides of his dark brown eyes with their pale yellowed pupils. He carries a near-permanent squint as if trying to see better. You can’t tell if he is smiling or scowling. He doesn’t wear glasses, admitting though that his weakening eyesight has been troubling him more than usual in recent months. He sports a short salt-and-pepper beard that makes him look at least ten years older than he is.

Shahbaz lives and works in the sleepy Bani Gala suburb of Islamabad as a self-employed sanitation worker. He sweeps the walkways outside a string of shops in Jinnah Market, the main shopping centre of the neighbourhood made famous first as the abode of the ‘father’ of Pakistan’s atomic bomb, Dr Abdul Qadeer Khan, and now Imran Khan, former prime minister. Yes, he once had a cleaning gig at Qadeer’s house and, no, he has neither met nor worked at Imran Khan’s. ‘*Onnub sadda ki pata?*’ [How would he even know about the likes of us?].’

How is the system rigged against him? ‘To be employed by the government means to have some form of schooling, preferably matriculation. I never could go to school. Even those with primary education tend to look down upon us if they discover we can’t read or write—I never stood a chance at securing a job with the CDA [Capital Development Authority],’ he sighs, with the weariness of someone adept at dealing with a *fait accompli*. ‘*T’leem da safai naal ki waasta?*’ [How is formal education linked to cleaning work?].’

From where he sits in his corner of the universe, it makes no sense.

He says that most ‘invisible’ citizens like himself in a rigidly hierarchical society pine for government jobs only because of the certainty of a steady job. He claims that even low-paying government jobs can be bought for sums that may run into the equivalent of the first three years of their salary. It is a battle he was never destined to win.

Then how did Shahbaz strike out independently in a field as socially indistinct as sanitation and carve out for himself an income worth the effort? He says his current occupation is a second professional avatar for him. He switched from being a worker at a garment-stitching centre in Islamabad, where he worked for 13 years, before becoming self-employed in a vocation no one really wants to pursue.

\* \* \*

Hailing from Sialkot, Shahbaz is a Punjabi Christian. His father was a factory worker in Sialkot but did not earn enough to look after his large family. Only two of his brothers managed to finish early classes. Three, including himself, did not go to school. ‘*Chaddo paray* [leave it be]!’ he says, when asked what he did during his several would-be school and teen years before coming to Islamabad. He prefers not to be probed about this period in his life, although he references a stint as a tailor’s apprentice.

That, eventually, was fortuitous. A distant cousin in Islamabad managed to get him a spot at a garment factory on the outskirts of Islamabad, although he was posted at one of their outlets near the Diplomatic Enclave where he worked in the backspace as a stitcher. ‘Those were some good years. It was the first time I was making money, I had friends and there were 14 fellow Christians on the team I worked with. I felt safe and stable [focused and consistent at work],’ he says.

He married into the family in Sialkot and, eventually, after a few years, managed to shift his wife and son to Islamabad to a neighbourhood in Bani Gala. He had two more sons. It started becoming difficult to afford being in ‘this expensive city’. ‘My earnings as a stitcher were not enough to cover our costs. One of my colleagues, a

fellow Christian, used to double up as a sanitation worker, plumber and electrician in his spare time. He got me involved with him and unlocked a welcome new revenue stream for me,' he says. 'No!' says Shahbaz, when asked if he had ever considered sanitation as a vocation: '*Kerra banda dojyaan da gund saaf karna chaanda ai?* [Who wants to clean up after others?]' He says he initially did some plumbing, but that wasn't enough. A household or business establishment deals with waste every day, while plumbing is not an everyday problem. The maths alone decided for him.

Back then, Bani Gala was growing and new houses and markets being built—in large part, without proper sewerage systems. At that time and even now, the CDA did not deploy resources here as much as it did elsewhere in urban Islamabad. The sanitation needs of the locality swelled. Residents and businesses became in need of cleaners in general. There weren't enough people available willing to clean.

Shahbaz decided to swallow his pride. '*Safai kerra ganda kaam ai?* [Cleaning is not dirty work]!' he points out drily. He started taking on small assignments and part-time gigs. Weekends were best when he could sometimes pick up five, even six assignments. Sometimes, he made more money in a month through his secondary profession than his principal one. It certainly helped that he lived in Bani Gala and did not have to travel far for such gigs, although on occasion he did that too.

Over the years, he made friends and acquaintances in his neighbourhood and in the bazaars of Bani Gala. While cleaning up on special assignments, he would often get a secondary assignment on the spot from a neighbour seeing him work for someone else. 'You don't find the likes of us in a shop. Where would you find us if not only when you run into us?' he says, almost chuckling.

Eventually, he reached a point when he had to make a judgement call. Should he abandon his stitcher's job and become a sanitation worker full-time? 'It was not easy. My wife was supportive. My mother, who did not like me cleaning gutters, was not. In the end, it was the money that decided—I needed it for my children. And besides, the stitching job was giving me a back problem because I had to spend hours on end hunched over and my eyesight didn't help,' he says.



Shahbaz gave up the only steady job he had had in his life after a 13-year stint. The money from it was paltry, but it had ensured he was not swallowed up by life in the joyless slums of Sialkot. ‘Yes, it was a bold decision to switch from [whatever passes for] a job to self-employment. I was afraid, but I had some small savings that gave me a cushion to help face any potential setbacks in getting my regular cleaning assignments. It worked out. God was kind to me.’

While his resurrection as a self-employed sanitation worker has worked out, all things considered—it has been 13 years—it has not been without its lows, which still haunt Shahbaz. ‘There have been months I haven’t earned even Rs5,000 and there have been months I have made over Rs30,000,’ he says. ‘I don’t want to be ungrateful to God because I have seen a couple of friends fall by the wayside as they mirrored my own struggles while I have, overall, managed to keep it together—but I did not choose this life, it chose me and that still disturbs me sometimes.’

He says that, while tailors do not rank high in social status either, being a sanitation worker is not something you would introduce yourself as with pride. ‘*Dowan di mazdoori ai, lekin safai walayan di izzat zyada nai bundi* [both tailors and cleaners work equally hard, but sanitation workers are rarely respected for their efforts],’ he says wistfully. You can almost see his mind summarize his experience of 13 years to both vocations and wince at the takeaway.

\* \* \*

In what good and adverse ways has his life been, as a sanitation worker? He squints and takes about half a minute to answer. ‘At least my children don’t have to be sweepers. My wife and I had promised ourselves that we would do our best to not let that happen,’ he says, his voice betraying a hint of emotion.

‘We wanted them to at least matriculate, but my eldest studied up to Class 8 and apprenticed as an electrician. It’s a good vocation. He is respected and brings home money. Our middle son could study only up to Class 6 and works as a sales assistant in a large store. His pay is not too much, but it covers all his costs. We don’t take

his money. He is young but carries himself well. He has been at his job almost two years now, which is a miracle since people have been losing jobs everywhere. Our youngest still goes to school and is in Class 4.

‘We think our children will do well. Most of my siblings’ children haven’t fared well. So, we can’t be thankful enough. This would not have happened if I had not managed to continue undeterred [as a sanitation worker]. I don’t think I would have managed [this well] if I had remained a garment stitcher,’ he says.

And what about the downside to being a sanitation worker, considering that he did not want to be one if given a choice? He ponders. ‘*Saariyan di izzat bundi ai, saddi vi ai* [everyone deserves respect, even us],’ Shahbaz says. His use of the first-person plural (*saabdi?*, not *meri?*) instead of singular, as has seemed his wont, is difficult to ignore, as he describes himself collectively as a person, his community of sanitation workers and his fellow Christians trapped in this line of work.

‘*Koi sannu choobra aakhda ai, koi koorray wala—asi tay kooray walay nai, asi tay safai walay aan* [some pejoratively call us untouchables, some call us waste-makers even though we are cleaners, not litterers],’ he says. He fiddles with his primitive mobile phone absentmindedly before collecting himself and putting it in the pocket of his turquoise shirt.

‘Please understand—I clean every day, which is a good thing. But I’ve never really liked it. Usually, this does not bother me unless I get dirty looks or hear the careless words people use sometimes. I know that no one is probably wasting their time thinking of hurting us, but sometimes they do inadvertently, and sometimes deliberately,’ he adds. ‘*Ki kar saknay aan?* [What can we do?],’ he shrugs.

He hastens to add that there are good-hearted people everywhere and most of the people he works with regularly are good to him: ‘They wouldn’t keep me working for them, especially the four shopkeepers in the [Jinnah] market who, despite some people trying to poison their minds (including a certain CDA Muslim sweeper who doesn’t like me, although I’ve done nothing to him), have kept me afloat for several years now.’

What about exploitation—does he get paid fairly or on time? ‘There are all types [of people]. What most want to pay today is the same as they did three to five years ago or even less, even though everything is so expensive now. Even for one-time assignments, people haggle over the price. I almost always agree because what can I do? I need the money. Apart from four people who pay me a monthly fee each—call it a salary—my various one-time assignment fees can vary from Rs100 to Rs1,000. Luckily, not many people clean gutters or animal waste and so, at least I can make some money doing this.’

There is cleaning and then there is cleaning. ‘*Jharroo laana asan ai, gutter di safai mushkil ai* [sweeping is easy, cleaning gutters is not],’ he says. Clearing choked sewer lines in homes or overflowing sewage outside houses or shops is never pleasant, he says. ‘People don’t want to sweep themselves but don’t want to pay much for sweeping either. At least with gutters, they understand that even we sanitation workers must get dirty to provide them with cleanliness. But often, they don’t want to agree on a clean-up assignment fee upfront and say they will pay whatever is fair afterwards. But, of course, afterwards they think Rs300 or Rs500 is too much and want to haggle down to Rs200 or Rs250. That is the worst part of my job!’

He says that low wages or fees is not something he alone grapples with—so do those sanitation workers employed with the CDA. ‘*Meri taran o vi lakhaan nai kamanday* [like me, they do not make lakhs of rupees either]!’ he says pointedly, adding that the wages of all sanitation workers are generally insufficient to support themselves and their families. ‘My [government-employed] colleagues say their overtime often goes unpaid, forcing them to work multiple jobs to make ends meet.’

Whether sanitation workers in Islamabad are in government jobs like his colleagues or self-employed like himself, they are often subject to exploitation by their employers, who may withhold wages or force them to perform tasks outside their job description. ‘I have been hired by government contractors for sanitation labour three times, but all of them were bad experiences. Twice, my payments were held up for months and one time, I was not even paid.’



*While Shabbaz's resurrection as a self-employed sanitation worker has worked out, it has not been without its lows.  
(Image credit: WaterAid / CS Sharada Prasad / Safai Karmachari Kavalu Samiti)*

He laughs when asked about negotiating hazardous working conditions with safety equipment or training. 'I have never received any training. Who would want to train me? I work with my hands. I have a personal tool kit that I use to clear choked pipes, drains and gutters but there is no safety equipment. I've not seen any.'

He says he once took on an assignment to clear medical waste at a hospital in Islamabad. 'Afterwards, I was vomiting. And my hands and face itched for days. I never accepted a hospital assignment again. I don't have a government job, so I must cover my medical bills myself and so I'm careful. Summer can also be difficult to work in due to extreme temperatures, which can lead to heat exhaustion and dehydration. But we can't always have the luxury of working in the shade or in the evening or inside comfortable offices and rooms like most people do.'

\* \* \*

What have been the most difficult times of his life as a self-employed sanitation worker? For Shahbaz, that counts as a seven-week stretch that left him bed-ridden

after he contracted typhoid. The local clinics—one in Bani Gala and one in nearby Bara Kahu—bungled up his treatment and he nearly died. Even after he recovered, he was not able to work for another three weeks. He ran up a huge debt that took him a year to clear. The only thing that kept the family afloat was his wife’s earnings—she works as domestic help in nearby homes. ‘I pray every day that my family or I don’t fall sick or become bed-ridden. It is too expensive to bear treatment costs; even basic medicines cost too much now,’ he says.

Another time, the owner of his small rented home near a village on the outskirts of Bani Gala ordered him out with only two days’ notice. He couldn’t find an alternative and his family and household items were thrown out. A family in his locality gave them a room for a few days until he was able to find another two-room first-floor home to rent, where he has been for over four years now. ‘But the rents are too high now. If my sons and wife were not also working, we wouldn’t be able to afford both rent and food. We have had to cut our food rations—everything is impossible now. There are no savings.’

What about his religious identity? How does it affect his standing and work? He is hesitant to say much. But after some gentle probing, he opens up a little. ‘*Asi saaday banday aan. Asi sarayan da palah chandain aan* [we are simple folk. We want the good of everyone],’ he says of his Christian community’s sentiments towards others.

‘We have deep respect for both Allah and His Prophet (PBUH). We respect all prophets. Normally, people do not bother us [because of our religious identity]. But sometimes, when someone associates our [sanitation] work with our [religious] identity, it is hurtful. Even then, we exercise restraint and are extremely conscious and careful about our behaviour, statements and reactions,’ he says. ‘*Mamooli jai gal vadh sakdi ai* [even a minor issue can blow up against us],’ he adds.

What about social safety support in case of any threats to him and others like him from the sanitation community? ‘In several areas in the city, we have a designated elder who acts as an advisor and interlocutor for our [Christian] community. In case anyone threatens us or if we feel we need help, we report to him and he intercedes

on our behalf with the local elders, including district administration officials and even maulvis, to defuse the situation before it becomes a problem. Thank God I haven't faced any problems so far, but I know of instances when our elder has had to intervene to resolve issues with others,' he says.

What about his rights as a human, citizen and community member? '*Sanu kaun puchda ai?* [Who bothers or cares about us?],' he says matter-of-factly. Even though this response was half expected, it is unnerving. 'Only God really cares about us. Whatever is in our kismet, no one can take away and whatever will be, will be,' he adds with untainted conviction.

Has he heard of Chief Justice Tassaduq Hussain Jilani's 2014 judgement directing the state to enforce the rights of all citizens from religious minorities? No, he hasn't. But he agrees that everyone has equal rights. '*Sarkar day kam sarkar janay* [it is the government's concern what to do about it],' Shahbaz says resignedly. '*Jay haq deway taan vi theek, jay na deway tay asi ki kar saknay aan?* [If the government gives us our rights, we'll welcome it. But if it doesn't, what can we do?],' he says, the picture of fatalism.

A final question. With about a third of his life spent as a sanitation worker cleaning up after others who are too oblivious or too ungrateful to even acknowledge it, what dreams does he still carry for his remaining years? 'A government job for my middle son, matriculation for my small child, marriage for my eldest son, no careers in sanitation for any of my children, a two-*marla* house of her own for my wife and a new motorcycle for myself. *Ay bohta tay nai?* [All this is not too much to ask for, is it?]' he says as he gets up to leave.

The new summer sun is already blazing. He rolls up his sleeves to swat away the heat and smooths down his hair. His slippers are encrusted with dried mud.

*A version of this was published in The News on Sunday on 13 August 2023.*

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# GUTTERS AND GHETTOS

**By Aurangzaib Khan**

He sits in the narrow street between a tangle of tiny houses, a path so thin no two men could walk it side by side comfortably. Scrupulously, he sifts layers of sand with running water in a stainless steel *parat* [pan]. The profession of cleaning, this knowledge of the city's drains and what flows through them, has taught him how to extract a modicum of luck from misfortune.

To separate a semblance of winking joy from the muck they toil in every day, sometimes he strikes gold—literally—in the deposits dredged up from the garbled veins of the Old City.

Around him stand men from the colony in a tight knot, watching him pan for gold, their dark faces animated by quiet anticipation as they wait to exhale a whoop of exaltation, should something shine in the sandy grey sediment that the prospector is busy stratifying—soaking and combing through with fingers, busy hands agitating the water, as if cajoling his luck to rise, to rise from the dregs of the drains of this city.

## **Christian Colony**

They need it tonight. Tonight, more than ever, they need their luck. It's the Saturday before Easter, the 'Joyous Saturday' of the Christian tradition.

On this day before Easter, all that everyone here in Christian Colony in the Old City of Peshawar—and Father's Colony in the Tehkal neighbourhood along the Jamrud Road—wants to talk about is the 'grievous' omission that is the failure of the Water and Sanitation Services Peshawar (WSSP), the local government's municipal utility, to pay sanitation workers salaries on an occasion as august as Easter. For the last four days, the workers have been on strike—the city and its various garbage collection points drawing rodents, flies and strays as waste rots everywhere, under a lingering miasma of decay.

Sharafat Masih\*, a resident of the Colony, shakes his head in disbelief as he says, ‘The delay in salaries has been going on for years now, but to not pay poor workers on Easter is callous.’ To make a point, this 60-year-old man, who wears his thick hair like a white crown over his face of molten chocolate, offers, ‘It is like your *chand raut*,’ the night of the moon before Eid-ul-Fitr—the annual festival that celebrates the end of the holy fasting month of Ramazan. The analogy rings startlingly immediate, and true, if only because of the occasion.

These last couple of years, Lent, the 40 days during which Christians fast and repent for sins, and Easter, have coincided with the time of Ramazan and Eid. It makes you see the Christian community — their humanity, in all its fragility and struggles, and their aspirations as both people of a faith and just plain flesh-and-blood humans—in the light of your own familiar context and experience. You see them through the pang of your own hunger, your own excitement at celebrating Eid at the end of a month of fasting.

Here on the ‘Joyous Saturday’, brought together by a happy coincidence and compelled to recognise similarities in a people we tend to ignore, and stay ignorant of in our ardour to build walls across caste, colour and creed, one can’t help but see that this place is less a ‘Christian Colony’ and more of a ‘ghetto’ for Christian sanitation workers.

Most here have little choice but to earn their bread from the dirty work of sweeping and cleaning streets and gutters that the majority faith recoils from, its attitudes made hard and rigid by the sanctimony of social and religious conditioning. A vocation that, says a Christian resident of the Father’s Colony, ‘the state and the society has reserved for the people of this Colony and others where the lowly sanitation worker lives.’

What has been an enduring lament against the apathy of the state towards their condition has turned to fear, the quiet despair of a cornered, impoverished community, caught up in a cycle of targeted violence, a stagflation that crushes all but the abjectly poor totally, a pandemic that not only brought a plague of heightened ostracism and unemployment for sanitation workers in household work, but also exposed them to its taint in hospitals and the public health sector.



## **In the ghettos**

This community in its ghetto-like organisation—a tiny-walled settlement, knit together not only by a kinship of faith and a common occupation, but also the social consequence of structural exclusion—is surrounded by the cavernous sprawl of the Old City, which remains divorced from the realities or festivities of its inhabitants.

In this, the Christian Colony is a microcosm for Pakistan, bringing that ardour to build walls—made righteous and unremitting by the heft of a majority faith and the power and privileges it brings—into sharp relief.

What sets apart this evening in Christian Colony, though, is the absence of fervour about Lent or Easter on the part of a minority, compared to the manic festivities that mark the approaching end of Ramazan and the arrival of Eid, on the part of the majority in the streets outside.

Little is joyous about the ‘Joyous Saturday’ here—this delay in getting paid becomes another occasion of waiting for deliverance, an illustration of the liminal state between suffering and redemption that our religious minorities are forever caught in.

Few here see how the metaphor of suffering could well apply to their life in the here and now. Fewer still dare to speak of it that way. What has been an enduring lament against the apathy of the state towards their condition has turned to fear, the quiet despair of a cornered, impoverished community, caught up in a cycle of targeted violence, a stagflation that crushes all but the abjectly poor totally, a pandemic that not only brought a plague of heightened ostracism and unemployment for sanitation workers in household work, but also exposed them to its taint in hospitals and the public health sector.

Later, as Sharafat leaves the Colony to sit with his fellow community members out in the shade of a mulberry tree, he stops by the man who is panning drain-sediment for gold in his path. The Colony is close to the old Sarafa Bazaar, the Jewellers’ market and its glittering shops, through the chaotic Ghanta Ghar Road with its clock-tower.

Through the city's substrata run a vast network of drains, where gold from the jewellers' workshops in the Bazaar's neighbourhood sometimes find its way into its ancient bowels. It is rare that the prospectors in the Colony find a glint of hope in the muddy sands they dredge up but, today, everyone is home and idle, with time on their hands and desperation on their side.

Around them, the Colony—a shoddily built, half-formed thing with open drains and manholes—is rendered worse still by the recklessness of those too poor to pay mind to the niceties of aesthetics or comfort. Its people move with the tired motion of a community weighed down by its own cares and upkeep, because no one else will.

With no one to look up to, they look down into the drains. And rare though it is, sometimes they get lucky.

As a child, Sharafat had no time for school. Within two years of his father's death, he was out sweeping roads and cleaning toilets, filling in for members of the family so they could take care of him and other children.

### **A lifetime of bondage**

Sharafat never found gold, but he had his wife. She was right by his side for the 36 years he swept the Grand Trunk Road out of Peshawar every day. To him, Noreen Masih\* was a pillar of strength. When he brought her here as a young bride from Faisalabad in Punjab, he was able to find her a job with the 'committee'—the Municipal Committee Peshawar, before it became the Municipal Corporation.

'My wife worked with me *mardwaar* [like a man],' says a reflective Sharafat, sitting lotus, like the Chinese figurine of a plump sage, in the gloom of the Colony church, age having robbed him of his teeth. 'There was no way I could have brought up eight children alone.'

Noreen's salary of Rs1,100 complimented his own. Back in the early 1980s, jobs were easy to come by, since 'Muslims did not want or claimed the janitor's job back then.' These days, the sanitation jobs are 'inherited', as are most of the houses in this Colony, bequeathed by a dying elder to the young.

The houses here have new rooms stacked atop the original homes to accommodate a growing next generation that has nowhere to live but this shanty settlement behind the Mughal caravanserai of Gor Gatri.

Much like the dwindling jobs, the cul-de-sac of Christian Colony, with its corroded brick walls around a huddle of misshapen, windowless houses with bad ventilation, its open drains and manholes, is emblematic of the perennial struggle of the community to cling on to the threatened little they have—space, security, identity, faith, opportunity.

Noreen's dead now and Sharafat cannot speak long before starting to wheeze—he is on medicines for a pulmonary condition that may have to do with decades of sweeping dust, he thinks.

Before his wife, there was another woman who took him in at a critical juncture in his life. He was only 10 when his father, Nazeer Masih\*, a sanitation worker for the Government Transport Service in the 1960s, died. His mother's death he does not recall since she died when he was very young. On his deathbed, his father put Sharafat's hand in the hand of his son-in-law, the husband of his elder daughter. 'He is yours to bring up,' said the dying man.

His sister became his mother and, years later, when Sharafat's elder brother passed away, he adopted his two little daughters. 'Back then, two people worked and could feed 10,' he says of his wife and himself, who brought up eight children, including two of his brother's children.

'We were poor but there was no inflation. Now 10 may work and cannot bring up two properly. We earn more but can afford less. As a community, as individuals, we remain where we were, if not worse off.'

As a child, Sharafat had no time for school. Within two years of his father's death, he was out sweeping roads and cleaning toilets, filling in for members of the family so they could take care of him and other children.

Times were tough and they could not afford any more than a single pair of clothes for a child every year. He wore his to work and came back home with faecal stains



*Residents of the Colony have little choice but to earn a living by sweeping and cleaning streets and gutters.  
(Image credit: Aurangzai Khan)*

on them, from cleaning latrines. ‘Back then, people did not have toilet commodes but raised footrests above the floor, and no running water,’ says Sharafat. ‘They were generally kind but wouldn’t want to come near us due to our profession and the stains on our clothes.’

His sister would wash his clothes for him daily after he returned, to wear to work the next day. Later, she arranged for him to get married. His brother-in-law, who panned for gold in the drains of Andar Shehar or Inner City, covered the expenses.

In time came the children and he watched as the Colony—that couldn’t grow horizontally in any direction—grew upwards, rooms added to the Corporation houses to accommodate growing families. Now it is so crowded that ‘there is no place to even keep out a dead body in case someone dies.’

A few years ago, the community that keeps the city clean sacrificed its own sanitation by razing the 10 communal bathrooms in the Colony to make room for

a church inside. The one in Kohati—the All Saints Church where a 2013 bombing killed a hundred people—was the closest church but still a fair distance from here, and security concerns demanded that they have one of their own.

### **Generations down the gutter**

Sharafat's children couldn't continue beyond high school—one son dropping out to take up a sanitation job at the secretariat, the other to take up drugs. When he retired, Sharafat built them two rooms above his house, and arranged for them to get married. Now their families occupy most of his hut-like house, with him sleeping under the terrace at the front of the home.

He worries about his son's drug addiction—a problem that figures eminently for its wide prevalence among the Christian community—even as he hopes his children get an education if they wish to 'get rid of the broom.'

Where there is poverty, he says, there is addiction and it keeps us pinned to that state. He laments, 'I am here to cover the school fee for my granddaughters but I won't be tomorrow. What happens then?'

Education, then, holds the key to redemption. Looking back, Sharafat says that conditions have worsened for his community with time. 'Back then, we could say our forefathers who migrated from Punjab were poor and illiterate and therefore fit for no other job but the lowliest. But where do we stand now, generations down since the Partition? You only have to look at this Saturday, this Colony to see where we are.

'Back then, even when we had a single room, people from our community would come here for a *janam din* [birthday] or Easter. We would have *chand raat* parties where women would participate without fear. We would sing hymns and take out festive *jaloos* [processions]. Now we are holed up here, with late salaries and no celebrations.'

Early next morning on Easter, Sharafat and others from the Colony go out at 3am to join a *jaloos* that gathers at the All Saints Church in Kohati Gate as part of the day's festivities. From there, it meanders through the streets of Lahori Gate,

Rampura, Qissa Khwani and back to the church at Kohati. Hundreds of faithful from the Christian community join from streets in the Old City, where people stay up late till *sehri* [sunrise], as is the tradition in the month of Ramazan.

For Sharafat, it's a happy occasion, but also one where, he feels, the Christian community can gather in a public space as part of their celebrations and let people know that they too are *abl-i-kitaab* [people of the Book] and bear witness to the rare occurrence of their Lent and Easter coinciding with the Ramazan and Eid of the majority.

Later that day, he sits outside with other men, watching the road. The afternoon is still and quiet, the road empty. 'This is our Easter,' he says, pointing at his children playing on a portable, austere swing set.

'When I was young, the world was open. Once we would have a proper fairground as part of our festivities, and organise theatre here, both Christians and Hindus. Now there is *badbandi* [ghetto limits within which a community lives or operates] everywhere.'

### **No way out**

Early that Easter morning, Ilyas Masih\*, an employee of the WSSP, went out to clean a street close to the Christian Colony where he lives. Even though on strike like other sanitation workers against the delay in salaries, he desperately needed money to get provisions for Easter.

When someone died in a street nearby, the family came looking for someone to clean the street to lay out chairs for guests that came to offer condolences. Ilyas went along, coming back with Rs 1,000.

'They were grateful that I agreed to clean their street despite Easter,' he says, sitting in a shaft of light coming in through the door of the church inside the Colony, darkened due to a power cut. His seven-year-old daughter steps in tentatively to whisper in his ear—she wants him to get him the sandals that her cousin in the Colony is wearing.

These last few years, the debts that Colony residents have accumulated have gone up in direct proportion to the delays in their salaries. Needy at the best of the times, their want for resources heightens around festivities. ‘The Easter today is like Eid for the *soodkhor*s [usurers],’ he says of the proprietors who sell their wares, particularly motorbikes, on usurious rates in the warrens of the Old City. The sanitation workers in the Colony buy motorbikes on monthly instalments, only to sell them to get the immediate cash they need, thus piling up debts in the process.

‘Seventy-five per cent of the Colony’s residents here are in debt to someone,’ says Ilyas, who recently borrowed Rs20,000 from a shopkeeper to clear the accumulated school fee for his daughter’s annual exam. ‘It’s better to take a *qarza* [loan] than to lose a year of education.’

Ilyas, 45, couldn’t continue his education beyond the third grade. His father was a singer at the local church and a sweeper at the Frontier College for Women. He was also an alcoholic who fed his habit with whatever little money he made. When his grandfather died and left his position with the Municipal Committee vacant, Ilyas’ father pulled him out of school to take up the job.

‘I cried hard that day,’ he says. ‘I was only nine and school was where all my friends were. My father said, ‘What is there for you if you don’t take the job?’ To leave school for a sanitation job was the last thing Ilyas wanted. ‘My schoolmates live in these neighbourhoods and I was ashamed that they would see me cleaning theirs,’ he says, voicing the stigma around sanitation work in Pakistan.

For years, he swept the roads in the Old City as a child with a shawl wrapped around his face to hide it. To people and his community, it appeared he was covering it to protect himself from dust—for him, he did not want to run into a school friend who would recognise him.

Eventually, they did, but some ignored him like they did not know him. Others were kind to him, saying they didn’t know he belonged to a family of sanitation workers. Some were incredulous when they ran into him cleaning streets where they lived. ‘Ilyas, is this what you do?’ they would ask.

To them, he would say, ‘Yes, your fathers and grandfathers left you a comfortable place, mine had this to leave me. What else is there for us to do?’

In time, he turned impervious to the shame such encounters brought. He still went out to work with the possibility of shame, but fought fear with logic. ‘I thought, even if my friends find out that I am a sanitation worker, what can they do about it? One of my friends said, “Relax, it’s fine, you are still our brother.” Today, he is in Germany and I am still here, sweeping city streets.’

Like his elderly neighbour Sharafat, Ilyas says that lack of education and skills has kept the community at the lowest socio-economic rung, but ‘the desire to acquire both is not present here because the opportunity is not present here.’

When you are part of a community, he says, which is ostracised, whose potential is held back in ghettos, ‘you stay a Class Four person’, with a Class Four outlook on life. You aspire to the position of a sweeper, a clerk, a nothing.

Class Four is the classification of the government-graded jobs wherein falls the ‘cleaner’ position reserved for sanitary workers. Other positions of driver, peon, gardener, guard, barber and cook also exist in the same category, but they are taken up by people of the majority Muslim faith due to their ‘clean’ nature. The dirty, defiling and therefore degrading work goes to the sanitary worker. In Pakistan, 80 percent of them are from the Christian community. If the authorities do not find a Christian to fill up a position, it then goes to a member of Hindu community.

‘There is a *ghutan* [suffocation] of outlook,’ he says. ‘The generations before and after us fail to recognise opportunity, to aspire to it, because we never see it. My generation is better educated than the one before, but there are few that dream big. *Kaam to yahi karna hai* [this is the work we have to do], so why study? And so, Class Four becomes a generational aspiration, a generational occupation.’

### **Class Four politics**

Politically, there has been some progress over the generations, and the community has managed to have representatives within the provincial and national assemblies.



But they are ‘selected’ by political parties, not elected. Those who are selected to work for the welfare of the community are ‘beholden to the whims of their political masters,’ according to a resident of Father’s Colony in Tehkal.

‘They have no real strength, no vote bank,’ he says. ‘They sit in the country’s supreme parliamentary authority but they are from Class Four backgrounds, they know little about lawmaking and development planning.’ In ‘selecting’ minority representatives politically, he says, the state and the governments offer ‘half a democracy to a people who have half a status as citizens.’

On Good Friday, the Friday before Easter, Saleem Masih\*, a worker of the WSSP who lives in Father’s Colony, sits in the market square in the middle of the colony. All he wants to talk about is the delay in the payment of monthly salaries. He has no time to talk about other matters because he needs to find temporary work to make some money before Easter. All he wants to know is if he can get away from here, from this place in the province, from this country.

As jets and airliners thunder over the Colony built across the road from the airport runway, sparrows flutter out in fright from their perches in the lone mulberry tree in the market square. Children playing with stray dogs look up at the booming jets in silence, sometimes in awe, sometimes in irritation at their having scared away their street pets. Asked if he has any children of his own, Saleem, 35, shakes his head and says, ‘I never got married. I don’t mean to ever. Why would I want to bring children to this place where all we have in store for us is misery?’

*\*Name changed to protect privacy.*

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# STIGMA AND SACRIFICE

**By Taha Kehar**

Minutes before she leaves for work, 40-year-old Shehneila\* changes out of the cotton sari she prefers wearing at home and dons a white shalwar kameez. She then applies a dash of orange-red powder to the parting in her hair. The *sindoor* is a flame-shaped symbol of her privileged status as a married woman and she wears it with unbridled pride. This auspicious dot of vermilion is an abiding testament to her identity as a Hindu woman in a Muslim-majority country.

As she drapes a chaddar over her head, Shehneila doesn't try to conceal the crimson mark and disguise this part of her identity. Whenever she commutes to work on her husband's motorcycle, Shehneila has never felt that her *sindoor* attracts curious glances from passers-by.

'The only reason I put away my saris and change into a shalwar kameez is because I can work easily in one,' she admits.

Six days a week, Shehneila performs a nine-hour shift cleaning the women's toilets at a private corporation on I. I. Chundrigar Road, Karachi's business district.

'I've been working here for almost a year,' she says. 'I haven't been given a uniform to wear, even though the other cleaner, who works with me, has one. I will probably get one soon, but I'm not sure when,' she says.

The shalwar kameez is therefore a convenient substitute for a uniform she has yet to receive from her employer. On some level, her decision to separate her work clothes from those she wears at home is an attempt to preserve her private life from the shadow of her professional obligations. But Shehneila's isn't just any ordinary struggle to establish a work-life balance. Sanitation work is often stigmatised in Pakistan and such tasks are usually performed by people from religious minorities. This is primarily because Muslims deem work that falls into this category, 'improper' and 'unclean'. Cleanliness, though, is at the heart of every faith. Hinduism also

emphasises the virtues of external and internal cleanliness. Every day, numerous Hindu sanitation workers in Pakistan often compromise on their notions of physical cleanliness in a quest to feed their families.

‘We are provided all the supplies we need to keep the toilets clean,’ Shehneila says, ‘But we aren’t given soap or towels to keep ourselves clean during work.’

Making a clear distinction between her work and home clothes allows Shehneila to restore balance and achieve some semblance of spiritual cleanliness.

However, the absence of a uniform or opportunities to ensure personal hygiene seem like trivial concerns when compared to the other challenges she has reckoned with over the decades.

### **Journey through time**

When she was younger, Shehneila never envisaged that she would be working as a commercial cleaner. She hails from a conservative Hindu family that had cultivated a home near Dayaram Jethamal Science College soon after they decided against migrating to India in 1947.

‘My maternal and paternal grandparents weren’t well off, but they managed to make ends meet by doing a few odd jobs,’ Shehneila claims. ‘My family was very strict and old-fashioned. Boys weren’t encouraged to study too much as they were expected to start earning. Girls, however, weren’t allowed to go to school at all. That’s why I have no formal education. I don’t even know how to sign my name.’

At the age of 17, Shehneila was plucked out of her father’s home and married off to a man from her community as her parents believed marriage would allow her to fulfil her destiny. ‘They didn’t know what life had in store for me,’ she says, laughing.

Her husband, who was almost a decade older than her, had been hired as a sweeper at an oil-and-gas company through a third-party contractor.

‘He only earned a monthly salary of Rs2,200 back then,’ she recalls. ‘It was difficult for us to make ends meet on his salary. My husband had to work long hours, so he couldn’t work another job.’

In the years after her marriage, Shehneila gave birth to two children—a daughter and a son. Her husband's financial standing wasn't very strong and the couple often struggled to meet their children's basic needs. Faced with these challenges, Shehneila realised that education opened the portal to opportunities and that her family's opposition to educating girls had cheated her out of a brighter future.

'I wanted to ensure that my children—especially my daughter—went to school,' she says. 'My extended family didn't approve of my decision, but my husband understood the value of sending our children to school.' In the absence of academic qualifications, Shehneila had to find her path to a comfortable life. 'The only way to achieve this goal was if both my husband and I worked,' she adds.

Nearly 20 years ago, Shehneila embarked on a quest for gainful employment that led her to initially take on work as a domestic cleaner. 'I started cleaning at a two-storey house rented by two families,' she says. 'The begum sahib who lived downstairs paid me Rs600 per month while the one upstairs gave me Rs700 per month.'

Shehneila found it increasingly difficult to survive on this meagre salary. 'In the evenings, I worked as a sweeper at a clinic run by a brain doctor in Karachi.'

Over the last two decades, Shehneila has worked as a sweeper at a large number of public and private offices. 'I've cleaned toilets and scrubbed floors at banks, clinics and schools,' she claims. 'I briefly worked as a sweeper at Mowloo Juma Hospital as well.'

Many of these gigs came her way through a third-party vendor. As a result, she was hired on a strictly contractual basis and did not enjoy the privileges that a permanent employee would. Shehneila's sole motivation for all the hard work she put in was to gain access to money to pay for her children's rising school fees and her family's everyday needs. Yet, she never compromised on her own dignity and wellbeing. 'I've never thought twice about quitting if the job gets too difficult for me to perform,' she says. 'I left one job because I was pregnant with my younger son and couldn't work to the best of my ability. I left another job after my older son tragically died.'

One of her longest stints as a sweeper was at a school where she had enrolled her two surviving children after it became difficult for her to pay their exorbitant tuition fees. ‘The principal of the school gave me a discount on their school fees,’ Shehneila says. ‘She also ensured that my children weren’t made to feel inferior to the other students just because their mother was a sweeper at the school. The teachers and students, who were mostly Muslim, treated my children with respect and didn’t make them feel like outsiders.’

Shehneila stayed at the job until her daughter completed her intermediate education and she could finally afford to pay her son’s tuition fee at a non-discounted rate. ‘My daughter’s graduation was a proud moment for me,’ she recalls. ‘I felt I’d done my best to spare her from the fate I had been cursed with.’

### **Less than perfect**

Shehneila’s current job at a private corporation came to her as a blessing in disguise at a time when the future seemed bleak. ‘I was working at a school until 2020 when the coronavirus started spreading all over the world,’ she reveals. ‘The school moved all its classes online and told me to stay at home. In the initial months, the school administration paid me my salary, but later decided to sack me. I stayed home for two years and struggled to find a job as most people didn’t want to keep a part-time domestic cleaner in their homes for fear of coronavirus.’

During these difficult months, Shehneila’s husband—who now works as a sweeper at a local college and earns Rs23,000—became the sole breadwinner. However, his salary wasn’t sufficient to run their household as the prices of essential items hit a record-high. Driven by the instinct to shield her family from poverty and hunger, Shehneila jumped at the first job she could find through a third-party contractor.

‘It’s not too bad,’ she admits. ‘I start work at 8:30 AM and clean the women’s toilets on all floors of the building at least three times a day. It’s a relief that people don’t leave the toilets too dirty after using them.’

Over the last few months, her initial sense of relief and contentment has gradually started to erode.



*Most sanitation workers find it exceedingly tough to take any extra time off from their professional commitments.  
(Image credit: World Watch Monitor)*

‘My job pays me Rs20,000,’ she says with a heavy sigh. Shehneila’s salary is below the minimum wage of Rs25,000, which was fixed in the budget for 2022/23. Over the last few months, efforts have been made by the relevant stakeholders to urge the government to raise the minimum wage. Yet, workers like Shehneila are likely to remain unaffected by these developments and continue to draw salaries that fall abysmally below the minimum wage.

‘It isn’t easy for me and my husband to feed our families with a collective salary of Rs43,000,’ she says, clicking her tongue in frustration. ‘One shouldn’t be *nashukra* [ungrateful], but so many of our day-to-day needs aren’t being met because we just don’t have the money.’

Shehneila doesn’t harbour any unrealistic expectations about the salary package she deserves. ‘I’m not demanding lakhs of rupees for the work I do,’ she clarifies. ‘I would like to get paid what I deserve. I’ve heard that cleaners who work for government departments get paid more than Rs25,000 for the same kind of work I do. Frankly, I’d be content with anything between Rs25,000 and Rs30,000.’

Shehneila isn't wrong about the salary increments for sanitation workers who are affiliated with government-run departments. In January 2023, the Sindh High Court directed the Sindh government to pay sanitation workers in all its departments the legal minimum wage of Rs25,000. Unfortunately, Shehneila believes it is impossible for sanitation workers who work on a contractual basis to obtain increments. In fact, the mere prospect of asking her third-party contractor for a raise gives her goosebumps as her previous requests—like those of many other contractual workers—have been rebuffed.

'My *thekedar* [third-party contractor] is very strict,' she explains. 'He says: *'Yeh thekay ka kaam hai, ishi paisay main karo, warna na karo* [this is contractual work. Either work for this salary or don't work at all].'

### **Leave of absence**

Apart from her financial woes, Shehneila struggles to obtain any non-wage benefits. She is entitled to a day off every week, but finds it exceedingly tough to take any extra time off from her professional commitments. The concept of sick leave seems almost foreign to her as her *thekedar* doesn't permit her the luxury of space to recover from any major or minor ailments.

'I suffer from a thyroid condition that results in light periods,' she explains. 'On some days, it becomes difficult to work. Just this morning, I called my *thekedar* and told him it wouldn't be possible for me to come to work. He said: *"Aisay nahi chalega"* [it can't work like this]. I told him to send another cleaner in place of me, but he refused as most of his other cleaners were either occupied with other work or had taken unpaid leave for Easter. I had no choice but to go to work.'

The attitude adopted by Shehneila's *thekedar* is not only sexist, but also serves as a glaring example of how third-party contractors are not keen to help their workers in the event of a medical emergency.

It is equally difficult for her to convince the contractor to give her time off to celebrate any religious festivals. 'At times, a generous employee at the company speaks to the *thekedar* and the manager on my behalf and gets me a day off for Holi. But we can't always rely on these kind gestures,' she says.

Casual leave is another ordeal that Shehneila and her colleagues have to reckon with. ‘Last month, my daughter got married and I needed a month off,’ she says. ‘My *thekedar* only allowed me to take leave if I agreed to bring a cleaner who could replace me for the duration of my leave. I agreed to his request because I needed time to prepare for my daughter’s wedding. The arrangement didn’t suit me as the *thekedar* paid the other cleaner for working last month. Believe me, I don’t have any money in my pocket at the moment.’

Nor did the *thekedar* allow her to take an advance for her daughter’s wedding. Fortunately, the bulk of the wedding expenses were borne by some generous relatives. ‘My brother-in-law, who is an electrician, helped me arrange the venue,’ she says. ‘Another family member helped us pay for my daughter’s *chaandi* [silver] jewellery. I was able to pay only for the food at the reception as I had received money from a committee pool. Overall, we managed to get her married with the support of our family.’

### **Pick-and-drop**

Every day, Shehneila arrives at the office at 8:30 AM. ‘I’m one of the fortunate few as my husband drops me to work and picks me up,’ she says. ‘The other cleaners don’t have that privilege and have to travel long distances to get to work. Most of their salaries are spent on their *kiraya* [travel expenses].’

Shehneila’s husband recognises these challenges and doesn’t want her to spend too much of her salary on commuting to and from work, especially with skyrocketing fuel prices. ‘My husband gets done from work at 3:30 PM,’ she says. ‘But he waits at the college until 5:30 PM when I get done.’

### **No place to call home**

Shehneila lives in a tiny apartment near Light House Market, Saddar, that she rents from a landlord who belongs to the Bohra community. ‘We pay him Rs15,000 in rent,’ she reveals. ‘We’re lucky we found this place as we have access to water and electricity. The gas supply isn’t as regular as we’d like, but we have no other complaints.’



Shehneila claims that her landlord ‘only rents his apartment to Hindus’, which serves as a much-needed safeguard from the threat of eviction she has encountered at the hands of previous landlords.

Her family’s housing dilemma began over a decade ago when they were asked to vacate the small quarters they lived in near the DJ Science College in Karachi. Shehneila’s family had lived here through the traditional, but legally unrecognized, *pagri* system. Under this arrangement, a landlord permits a tenant to use the property for a prolonged duration after receiving an amount that is below the market price. The tenant, in turn, pays a nominal monthly rent and cannot be evicted, even though the property remains in the landlord’s name and he continues to pay taxes on it.

‘We had no choice in the matter and started looking for a new place to live,’ Shehneila says. ‘This proved to be difficult as most landlords didn’t want a Hindu family on their property.’

Some of the landlords she came across put forward unusual conditions that made her feel increasingly insecure. ‘One of my previous landlords expected me to convert to Islam in order to lease his property,’ she says, still horrified at the memory of this conditional kindness.

### **Holiday season**

A fresh fear lodges itself into Shehneila’s heart whenever the religious holidays are around the corner. ‘Nowadays, we barely have extra money to spend on new clothes for Diwali and other holidays,’ she says. ‘Thankfully, my children have always understood these matters. The only thing my son wants is to light fireworks on Diwali. I’m too scared to let them light fireworks as most of my neighbours are Muslim, so I usually send him to my mother’s house in Keamari. Over there, Hindus visit the mandir and celebrate the festival without any restrictions.’

Shehneila’s fear of celebrating her religious holidays has its roots in an incident that occurred a few years ago. Back then, she was living in a small flat in Pakistan Chowk and wanted to prepare *gur ki roti* [jaggery bread] for one of her religious festivals.

‘I didn’t want to make the *rotiyan* indoors as smoke would have spread through the entire house,’ she explains. ‘I went outside, set up a makeshift *choola* [stove] and began preparing the *rotiyan*. Within minutes, my neighbours had gathered around me and accused me of practicing black magic. They were convinced I was a witch.’

Troubled by their aggressive reaction to a seemingly innocuous act, Shehneila left the neighbourhood the very same night. ‘My family’s safety always comes first,’ she adds.

### **A tenuous freedom**

Apart from these occasional threats to her family’s safety, Shehneila complains of no other form of discrimination.

‘I live here with complete independence,’ she declares proudly. ‘My children celebrate Independence Day with greater enthusiasm than our own religious holidays. They would even die for their country.’

These words are spoken with sincere patriotic feeling, but they also reflect a survival instinct that has been learnt and sharpened over time.

‘I do wish the government did more for Hindu sanitation workers as well as the entire Hindu community,’ she admits. ‘My husband and I have cleaned toilets and swept floors just to ensure that our children gain an education. I wouldn’t want my children and grandchildren to follow the same path as me. I hope the government can do something to help Hindu children gain an education so they too can find better opportunities.’

*\*Name changed to protect privacy.*

*Published on Lok Sujag on 19 August 2023.*

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# A WORKFORCE TO RECKON WITH

**By Usman Saeed**

Over the years, the Christian community of Lahore has provided the city with some of its finest judges, doctors, teachers and soldiers. However, no other profession has been so overwhelmingly dominated by this community as that of keeping the city clean. About 80 percent of Lahore's sanitation workforce is Christian. Come rain or shine, heat or cold, these sanitation workers go about their work on the roads, in the puddles and within the drains.

They sweep the streets, mop the floors, clear the drains (either with bamboo sticks or with their bare hands) and pick up garbage that no one else dares touch. Broken glass and other sharp objects, tossed carelessly in the garbage, cut them and noxious gases from the sewers suffocate them. Some die in accidents and some are impaired for life. But they take it all in their stride. Hazards of the job. In return, society shuns them and treats them as untouchables.

We caught up with three men from different parts of the city. A sanitation worker with a settled job, a self-employed sewer cleaner and a retired government sector employee who chose sanitation work over other options. They are all Christian, they are all illiterate and they all help keep Lahore clean.

## **The railway man**

Sarwar\* is a cautious man. He removes the manhole lid and immediately steps aside, letting the poisonous mix of hydrogen sulphide, methane, ammonia and other dangerous sewer gases evaporate. It will be at least 30 minutes before he can descend safely into the hole. 'These fumes can kill,' he says, for the memory of three friends—who underestimated the toxicity of the gases generated by the decomposition of organic matter in the city's underground drains and pipes—is still vivid in his mind. One survived. The other two did not.

‘On hearing news of the accident, I rushed to the place but it was too late. When we reached the site of the tragedy, my friends’ lifeless bodies lay on the roadside, covered in sludge. Sarfraz [the third friend] was still alive, so we turned him over and pressed on his back, making him vomit the deadly fluid,’ he recounts.

Sarfraz lived. A few weeks in the hospital and he was back in the gutters, now much more wary when approaching a manhole. Today, he is Sarwar’s supervisor and has survived to warn his charges, who work in the Pakistan Railways sanitation department, of the dangers that await them inside urban sewers.

So, what made a pro like Sarfraz let his guard down? ‘The officers,’ says Sarwar. ‘They were in a hurry to get the blockage cleared as the locality was flooded. In spite of warnings by the workers, the officers ordered them to go into the hole where they were instantly knocked out cold.’

Underneath the sprawling metropolis that is Lahore, exists an intricate network of gutters and drains. Into these drains flow rivulets of sludge—putrid and toxic. From residential quarters to industrial installations, all empty their excretions and waste into this network, to be passed on to the *nullahs* which then dump these into the nearby river Ravi. When these drains are clogged, the city wrinkles its collective nose. That is when Sarwar and his friends spring into action.

Sarwar Masih is 55 years old and a seasoned sanitation worker. His adopted profession is largely the domain of the minority community from which he hails. Christians make up about 5 percent of Lahore’s population but constitute around 80 percent of its sanitation workforce. This percentage touches nearly 100 when it comes to cleaning gutters. ‘Muslim sweepers tend to prefer sweeping roads and streets as opposed to cleaning gutters and sewers,’ he says, implying that Muslim sanitation workers are reluctant to physically enter the drains.

About 33 years ago, Sarwar had a falling out with his father, a brick kiln worker, another exploited segment of society, and left his village near Raja Jang for Lahore. ‘I was reckless and thought better prospects awaited me in the city.’

What sort of job did he have in mind when he made the big decision to enter this

great city? ‘Since I was *angootha chbaap* [an illiterate person unable to sign his name] and a Christian, I soon found out that my only job opportunity lay in the gutters. My cousin got me a job at the sanitation department of Pakistan Railways and I have been working with the organisation ever since,’ he says, scratching his beard, snow-white against his dark, weather-beaten skin. He goes on to boast that it is a permanent job with the assurance of a pension. This is even more crucial now that he retires in five years’ time.

Manual sewer cleaning is fraught with risks. These are both immediate, such as the risk of being asphyxiated by gases, and protracted, in the form of skin and lung disorders. Although he has largely managed to remain unscathed over the years, barring a few minor accidents, he has seen many of his friends develop health problems on account of constant exposure to hazardous work environments. According to Sarwar, the Water and Sanitation Authority (WASA) has now acquired the capacity to clear drains mechanically, but the Pakistan Railways’ sanitation workers enjoy no such luxury. ‘If you want a drain to be cleared, you have to send the man in,’ he says.

What about the personal protective equipment (PPE) that accords a minimum level of safety to sanitation workers? ‘*Koi vee nai* [none whatsoever],’ he says, pausing to repeat, ‘*Koi vee nai* [none whatsoever]. A rope that girdles the waist and a piece of cloth to cover the face. These are our only protections.’

Masks? ‘None.’

Gloves? ‘None.’

Boots? ‘Are you kidding, sir *jee*?’

But surely there are injuries? ‘We have our own Railways hospital. If we are injured, they patch us up and we are good to go,’ says Sarwar nonchalantly.

Did he ever receive any training prior to descending into a manhole for the very first time? ‘We were guided by our *ustaaads* [teachers] who had experience of cleaning gutters. They passed onto us what knowledge they had. *Agay gutteran ney sab kujh sikha dita* [thereon the gutters were our teachers].’

His tools comprise a *baans* [a long bamboo stick], made by splitting a bamboo tree trunk (Pakistan Railways sanctions one a month to its gutter cleaners), a shovel if needed, and a bucket. He ties the thick rope around his waist and descends cautiously into the manhole after the toxic gases have filtered through the hole and he deems it safe enough to venture in.

The metal steps along the chamber wall are heavily corroded and not to be trusted as they are likely to give way under his weight. The rope is his only protection and only means of escaping any danger. The person holding the other end of the rope stays alert. A tug means that the man at the other end needs to be pulled out instantly.

How does he tackle the officers who are overly keen to send him in? ‘We procrastinate as much as we can on one pretext or the other. You have to do it tactfully without offending the superiors,’ he says.

To be a sanitation worker—especially a sewer cleaner—in Lahore is akin to being an untouchable. They have always been shunned by the city’s majority population. A wider belief that permeates society is that sanitation workers carry disease and contaminate the very place they sit. People do not share utensils with them (some households reserve a separate metal glass for them) or allow them to sit on their furniture. For some, shaking hands with a sanitation worker is an abomination. Sarwar, however, appears reluctant to talk about the discrimination on account of his religion or profession. He still has this to say: ‘There were those in the 1970s and early 1980s who campaigned for Christian sanitation workers to be clothed in black militia so they could be readily identified. They believed that gutter cleaners would contaminate their utensils and were best kept apart, away from public places, and especially eateries. They thought we brought disease with us.’

Like most of his colleagues, Sarwar would rather not introduce himself as a sanitation worker. He is mindful of the stigma attached to his trade, knowing full well what effect such knowledge is likely to have on a stranger. So how does he introduce himself?

‘I tell them I work for Pakistan Railways,’ he says with a grin.

## The freelancer

‘There is no *choorba* here. We are all sanitation workers,’ says Amir Masih as he tells off someone looking to hire a hand to unclog his gutter. The job is right up Amir’s street but he turns it down. He won’t stand for being called a *choorba* (a derogatory term reserved by the majority Muslim population for Christian sanitation workers) and would rather risk losing business than compromise his pride. Even though the term has been banned by the Punjab Government since 2021 and its use made a cognizable offence, it still slips off the tongue every now and then.

Amir Masih has been sweeping the streets of Lahore since the time he could hold a broom. His father worked on daily wages for the now defunct Lahore Municipal Corporation as a sanitation worker, as did his father before him. Since school was never a family priority and the entire household was engaged in sweeping—either in houses or on the streets—Amir had very little choice. He went on to ply the trade of his forebears.

His father would work for the ‘Caorporation’ till noon and then operate privately in the evening, cleaning drains in homes or on streets for residents of the area, with Amir always in tow. That is when Amir began to hone his skills. In the beginning, it was the odd toilet or blocked drainpipe. Later, he started challenging himself by venturing into the main drains and going down the manholes. Today, in Data Nagar, Badami Bagh, whenever a drainpipe gets clogged and causes the street to flood, most heads turn towards him. ‘I can go down the manhole as deep as 30 feet and into the drains as far as 50 feet with only a rope around my waist,’ boasts Amir.

Skilful as he is, Amir has his limitations. ‘I avoid attempting to clear a drain when it’s flooded. You see, I am not a *taroo* [swimmer],’ he admits.

Amir is mindful of the dangers that await a sewer worker. He says he has lost friends to the poisonous sewer gases that keep building up in the subterranean drains of Lahore and continue to claim the lives of those who either fall in accidentally through a crevice or venture down a manhole, underestimating their force much to their peril. ‘They were friends from Joseph Colony (a nearby Christian neighbourhood). *Onna noo gas paey gayee* [they were hit by the gas],’ he said.

He also recalls his own experience with the deadly gas: ‘It was so overwhelming. I could hardly breathe and felt dizzy. Thankfully, I had my wits about me and frantically yanked at the rope. I was heaved out of the hole just in time.’

Is all the risk really worth it? Does it earn his family a comfortable living? Barely. At 40, he still struggles to keep his head above water with his meagre earnings. He tells us that the bad days, when he finds no jobs, outnumber the good ones. Often, he has to turn to his siblings for loans. He yearns for a more secure, permanent job with the guarantee of a regular income. However, till such time he has to stick to his private practice.

Khushi, the eldest of his three daughters, is about seven years old and still not enrolled in school. So, is educating her or the other two, Anmol and Muskan, who are not far behind in years, among his plans for his children? ‘Indeed, I will educate my daughters,’ he says. But then came the caveat: ‘... when I am able to afford it.’

Thankfully, she hasn’t yet picked up the family broom and is allowed to frolic in the streets. This gives us hope that, perhaps one day, when Amir is able to pay for her schooling, we might find her among books instead of garbage.



*Dangers await them inside urban sewers every single time.*

*(Image credit: Rabat Dar)*



Amir is a proud Christian (*Masih*, not *Esai*, he corrects us) who makes no secret of his faith, particularly in a country where religious minorities are routinely persecuted—especially when he dwells so near Joseph Colony, which once bore the brunt of the majority population’s pious wrath. He carries the holy cross not only in his heart but also on his right upper arm, held aloft by a defiant falcon.

The python on the left arm, just underneath his vaccination marks, is more of a mystery. He frequently misses church and confesses to indulging in a little weed every now and then, but no one dares call him a *choorba*.

### **The retiree**

Each day, Robert rises with the sun. He turns on the electric motor that pumps water into the overhead water tank so that it is filled by the time his brood of sons, daughters-in-law and grandchildren are up. He then sweeps the courtyard of his modest dwelling—a two-room servant’s quarter in a government residence rented to him by the officer to whom the house has been allotted. He collects the garbage and disposes of it at the nearest Lahore Waste Management’s garbage point. Then, with broom in hand, Robert walks towards Griffin Colony, a neighbourhood near Mughalpura, for his daily work.

Remarkably spry for his years, Robert sweeps the streets of a gated community, collects the garbage in his wheelbarrow and clears the clogged sewage pipes of the neighbourhood. He is paid individually by all the houses for his services as a street sweeper and garbage collector. Drains, however, are cleared at a fee.

Robert will happily run an errand for you, bringing groceries from the nearby market if you are polite to him. He believes that people in this locality are less prejudiced than in some other parts of the city, even though there are always those who tread the traditional path of bigotry and are quick to remind him of his place in the world. He believes that education has done this neighbourhood a world of good. ‘Some people are not afraid of even shaking hands with me,’ he says.

He is 74 and retired. Before retirement, Robert worked as a skilled painter in a state-owned organization. On his superannuation, he tossed his painter’s brush away and picked up a broom.

Why did he choose to become a garbage man when he could have tried for a better job commensurate with his skills? He points out three factors that have ‘qualified’ him for the job of a sanitation worker: he is unlettered, a Christian and jobless in Lahore.

*\*Name changed to protect privacy.*

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# DIVING INTO FILTH FOR A LIVING

**By Zofeen T. Ebrahim**

Short salt-and-pepper hair on his balding head, a leathery face that makes him look well beyond his 40-something years, what is most noticeable about Yusuf Iqbal Masih are his protruding ears and steely gaze. This completely unschooled father of four, popularly known as ‘Mithoo’, has been clearing clogged sewers in the port city of Karachi, home to over 20 million residents, for 28 years. ‘I did not have a moustache or a beard when I started working. I must have been about 13,’ he said.

According to the 2017 census, Christians account for 1.59 percent of the population of Pakistan; in Karachi, they account for 2.1 percent of the city’s population. About 80 percent of sweepers in Karachi employed by different civic and land-owning agencies belong to the Christian faith.

As the eldest of seven siblings, with a good-for-nothing father who loitered around with friends and never bothered to work, Mithoo was left to help his mother, who worked as a domestic helper in several homes, to put a meal on the table every day for a family of nine (which included his five sisters and a younger brother).

‘When you’re hungry, you don’t have the luxury of being choosy about the kind of work you do. Hunger forces you to do the filthiest of tasks,’ he says matter-of-factly.

‘I started off as a *kaccha* [not formally employed by a government department] sweeper getting Rs5,000 per month,’ says Mithoo. ‘Just a week into my work, my ustad asked me to jump into a sewer and I did not even know how to swim.’ And thus began a career clearing ‘thousands of choked sewers, from as shallow as five feet to some that were 30 feet deep’, in various parts of Karachi, including Shirin Jinnah Colony, Bath Island, Neelum Colony and Gizri.

‘When the lines are clogged, we use a long bamboo shaft to prod, hook and pull out the waste. But when that fails, we climb down into the gutters and clean them out with our hands,’ he says.

He still remembers the first time he opened a manhole lid and was shocked to see thousands of cockroaches crawling inside. Today, he thinks nothing of going down a rat- and cockroach-infested sewer. ‘It’s just a job,’ he says. ‘He is a legend among his co-workers because he can hold his breath for a good two minutes, which many cannot do,’ says 45-year-old Amjad Sadiq, his colleague who works in Clifton’s Block 1 area. He warns Mithoo that he is losing his touch because he has developed the bad habit of chewing gutka [a tobacco preparation of crushed betel nut, slaked lime and sweet or savoury flavourings]. ‘Gutka actually helps keep your mouth closed when you’re under water,’ Mithoo cuts in. Taking a green-and-white sachet from his pocket, he confesses to being addicted to it. ‘I spend about Rs300 on it every day,’ he says.

Six years ago, in 2017, he finally found a permanent job at the Karachi Water and Sewerage Board (KWSB), responsible for the production, transmission and distribution of potable water to the citizens of Karachi, with Rs28,000 every month as his salary. ‘Just getting paid regularly is a big relief in this time of inflation,’ he says gratefully.

‘Government service is still considered a source of security for many,’ says a senior KWSB official, requesting anonymity. Permanent employees are entitled to sick leave and retirement benefits, and there is provision in the law for a family member to take their place when a worker retires or in case the worker dies before attaining retirement age. ‘Their job comes with health risks and there is provision for free—but very basic—healthcare in some designated government facilities for them,’ he added.

Naeem Sadiq, a Karachi-based rights activist who has long been fighting for the rights of sanitation workers through his organisation, Justice for the Voiceless, says it is important to pay attention to the army of private sewer cleaners spread across town. ‘These are unregulated workers who are cruelly exploited and underpaid. If something unforeseen happens, it is very easy to shrug off all responsibility. After all, these people are not on anyone’s radar,’ says Sadiq. However, he says there is little political will to resolve this.

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Mithoo's life is one huge sea of sameness, which he finds comforting. His regular refuge is a small room next to a public toilet facility, outside a mosque near Bilawal Chowrangi, in Clifton, where co-workers come to bide their time and play ludo. 'We sit all day in the room till we are called for duty, which can be as many as five days a week or sometimes none.'

'If the problem is complex, it can take us half a day, otherwise an hour and a half, to unclog a sewer,' he says. But he and his co-workers do not always sit idle. They get called for odd jobs in nearby homes, offices and restaurants for which they get paid. 'Last week, we were asked by someone from an apartment block in Clifton to open a choked gutter as the effluent had flooded the road. This was after working hours but the four of us decided to get to work quickly as we were being paid Rs5,000. We prayed these people had not complained to the water board as it would mean being sent to do the same job, which would then be considered part of our duty and mean no extra cash,' explains Mithoo.

Although not allowed to moonlight during office hours, the agency often looks the other way 'if they freelance and earn a little extra,' says the KWSB official. 'They get work regularly from restaurants to unclog the drains near their property, which does not come under the purview of the KWSB,' he says, adding that most of the choking happens because all the oil and grease from the restaurant collects there and is not properly disposed of. Since these people are extremely skilled at their jobs, these gigs become relatively well-paid because ordinary labourers are not only unwilling but also unable to do them.

Mithoo is among the 2,000-plus sewer cleaners who are given the title 'health worker'. 'We may be given *fancy angrezi* [English] names like "health worker" and "sanitation worker", giving us a false sense of dignity, but at the end of the day, we are just *bhangis* [drug addicts] to people,' he says resignedly, using the pejorative term.

The civic agency has, in the past, been criticised for advertising and even hiring non-Muslims for this job. 'A few years ago, we started hiring Muslims to remove the sense of discrimination and to be politically correct, but they would refuse to go down the sewers; they occupied the position but did no work,' says the KWSB

official, adding that they were eventually assigned other tasks. In Punjab, the discriminatory policy of employing ‘only non-Muslims belonging to minorities’ for janitorial work was struck down in 2016.

But of late, many Afghans have joined the informal workforce in Karachi. They may not dive into the sewers but when they are cleaning drains, they are, in effect, handling the same sewage. Mithoo is not too worried about this upcoming competition since Afghans cannot find permanent employment in a government organisation without a computerised identity card.

Till 1996, street cleaning, solid waste disposal, and water and sanitation came under the Karachi Municipal Corporation (KMC) after which the water and sewerage part of the municipality was handed over to the autonomous KWSB.

### **Mithoo’s home, as drab as his life**

Winding through narrow alleys in the neighbourhood of Hijrat Colony, past tattered curtains and a few goats tied outside the owners’ homes, you come across Mithoo’s home, with his silver-and-black bicycle standing in attendance. Climbing down the steps is a small landing with a kitchen to the right. Neha, 9, his youngest child, is sweeping the floor.

The two-room quarter has little light and ventilation. A threadbare carpet covers the floor of the first room, which is Mithoo and his wife Sumaira’s bedroom. Their daughter, Neha, sleeps with them on the carpet. It also doubles as a living room when guests visit or serves as a dining room in the evening. The second room on the side is occupied by his three sons. The rent for this quarter is Rs10,000 a month. For the last three months, he has been paying nearly Rs10,000 a month for electricity that he claims they barely use. ‘We just have two fans and three bulbs, those too energy savers, and even these are used sparingly, and only at night,’ says Mithoo, worry lines etched deep on his forehead.

More than half his salary goes towards repaying a loan he took for his son Kashif’s medical treatment after the latter met with an accident that left his leg seriously injured four years ago. ‘We pay Rs10,000 every month to the bank we took the loan from and Rs8,000 to a Pathan we borrowed from,’ says Sumaira.

Apart from his monthly salary, Mithoo gets a bonus (a month's salary at Christmas) and Rs9,500 at Easter to be deducted every month at the rate of Rs1,600. The monthly allowance to buy a uniform, soap and hair oil has long been discontinued, even before he joined the civic agency. 'Even during the rains, when the government declares an emergency, we work non-stop and are not given any overtime. All we get is free meals during those days,' he says. They get Rs1500 a month to buy the bamboo with which they clear drains, but have to make do or borrow one from a co-worker if it breaks.

In these times of spiralling food and petrol prices, Mithoo is lucky to have all his three sons, aged 22, 20 and 18 (from a previous marriage) fully employed. With one working as sweeper in a school and the other two in two different apartment blocks in Clifton, together the three earn Rs40,000 every month, with each pooling in Rs10,000 to the home kitty.

None of them wants to clean gutters. None of them have been to school. 'What's the point if our lot has to sweep roads anyway?' Mithoo asks.

For the last month, Mithoo has brought his half-paralysed friend, Pervaiz, to live with him. 'I call him "Pajee". He has been my most trusted friend for the last 28 years and his landlord had kicked him out after he was unable to pay his monthly rent, not being able to work any longer. He needs me now as he has nowhere to go. His wife has died and his children cannot support him.

The water board gave his younger son employment in his place, but the son is on drugs—ice (crystal methamphetamine). Given his irregular attendance, the board was forced to sack him,' says Mithoo. 'Pervaiz does not need much looking after; he can manage his toiletry needs himself, which is a big relief. Other than that, he eats whatever we eat and is not a bother at all,' adds Sumaira.

### **Fights at home**

Life at home is no bed of roses. Poverty is the cause of many of Mithoo's altercations with his wife, he explains. 'She cannot keep quiet and I lose my patience with her,' he adds sheepishly. 'I work so hard so that they can all sleep on a full stomach,' he

says defensively. He says he gives all his earnings to his wife but keeps a little for one 'pastime'. 'I like to drink some days, just once a week or more if a friend offers me a free drink,' he confesses diffidently.

While admitting that he is a good husband who works hard and takes care of the needs of his family, Sumaira says there are days when he comes home drunk. 'That is when the monster in him surfaces. He has such a foul mouth and he hits me as well. He ruined our Eid (Easter) completely,' she rues, adding, 'I had almost packed up my things and walked out the door with my daughter when his sister beseeched me not to leave.'

According to Naeem Sadiq, every sanitation worker should be paid a salary that is at least 50 percent higher than the national legal minimum wage. He has filed a petition in the Sindh High Court for implementation of the minimum wage law for all sanitation workers, even those employed on a contractual basis. 'But,' he emphasises, 'no human should be forced to enter a sewer bubbling with raw human excreta, disease and poisonous fumes.' He has been demanding the complete eradication of manual scavenging of sewer gutters for a decade now. 'Machines should replace human beings to clear raw sewage,' he says.

He blames every Pakistani for contributing to perpetuating this crime. 'We are the problem. Gutter cleaning happens right in front of us every day and we let our fellow human beings go inside. Why don't we stand up for them? Why do we keep silent?'

### **Crumbling ladder, sewer gas**

Manually scavenging through the dark slush of 1,750 million litres of sewage that the city's 20 million residents produce daily is dangerous. According to Mithoo, underwater, with eyes and mouth closed, 'it is just one's brain and bare hands' that are at work, unclogging crumbling pipes of faeces, plastic bags and hazardous hospital refuse, but he remains oblivious to the risk of disease and injury from handling faecal and municipal sludge as well as poisonous gases without protection. 'Look at me, I am fine; I have no health problems,' he insists.



‘You have to be really alert and deft and get the job done quickly because you know you will need to come up for air soon,’ he says, adding, ‘I’ve had to unblock big boulders and pieces of wood that have caused gutters to choke.’ Once extricated, he also must bring up this waste.

But it is a risky job, working in a sewer, wearing nothing but a *chaddi* [knickers] or a shalwar and a rope belt around his waist, his lifeline to the world above, going down into the foul-smelling water, which may contain needles and shards of glass. ‘We tug on the rope if we want to come up, but if we have taken longer than usual and have not pulled at the ladder, the men above haul us up regardless, assuming something has gone wrong,’ he said.

The iron ladder fixed to the side of the manhole is often corroded and, while descending, ‘if you miss a step, you can get seriously hurt, sometimes by a protruding broken rung.’ Many have lost their lives due to asphyxiation owing to the noxious gases that lurk inside, says Mithoo.

‘Quite a few of our workers have died in the past,’ the KWSB official admits, but says, of late, they have also become aware of the dangers and leave the manhole lid open for a while before going down. ‘We are trying to replace the concrete pipes or line them with PVC ones, but it is costly and will take time,’ he says.

Realising that the work was inhuman, around 25 years ago the KWSB introduced diving suits, harnesses, gas masks and oxygen cylinders for this job. ‘We also provided them training, but they [the sewer cleaners] found the gear cumbersome and refused to wear it,’ says the KWSB official.

Sadiq, an occupational health and safety expert, refuses to buy this excuse. ‘If this kind of justification was given anywhere else in the world, these officers would be put behind bars,’ he says.

The agency also realises it is becoming increasingly difficult to convince the next generation to do this kind of work. ‘We do not have a trained second tier of sewer cleaners because what we are asking the younger lot to do is unacceptable to them.’



*Mannually scavenging through the dark slush of 1,750 million litres of sewage that the city's 20 million residents produce daily is dangerous.  
(Image credit: Zofeen T. Ebrahim)*

As a result, the agency has been forced to mechanise some steps in the sewer-cleaning process. Suctional jetting machines that remove the water from the sewers so that cleaners can go down the manhole, which can be as deep as 30 feet, and not work underwater, has been a big step. 'Although the water board has some 100 such mobile tanker-like contraptions (another 50 should soon be brought onto the road as well), the sludge and big boulders that clog the drains still need to be taken out manually.'

Not if Sadiq can help it.

He, together with a group of philanthropists, engineers and designers, has come up with an indigenous solution—a prototype of a gutter-cleaning machine that has two functions: a grabbing arm that can be sent deep into the sewer to bring up

stones, rocks, glass, metal, sludge and silt, and a high-pressure jetting contraption to unclog the lines. ‘It’s probably the cheapest sewer-cleaning machine in the world, costing Rs1.5 million; in India, it is equivalent to 4 million Pakistani rupees and in the UK it costs Rs40 million,’ he says.

But if manual scavenging is banned, how and where will these illiterate sanitation workers find an alternative source of income? Sadiq has an answer for that. ‘The two men who go into the sewers can operate this machine from the ground above instead of having to dive into the filthy water,’ he says. ‘If this finds acceptance and starts functioning across Pakistan, I’ll die a happy man.’

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