

## **The Echoes of Silence: Life of Crematorium workers during Pandemic**

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### **Abstract:**

*The Pandemic has brought the world at a crossroad. The uncertainty has forced people to adapt to new way of life known as the new normal. Loss of job and livelihood due to restrictions took a toll on every household. At a time when the common people were forced to stay inside their houses and maintain social distancing, the world saw group of people who headlined to fight the battle and protect the people from the deadly virus. Front line workers such as doctors, nurses, police, and private food delivery workers worked round the clock to serve the common people following the health protocols. There has been a group of individuals who unlike the other acknowledged and appreciated front line workers have been unperceived for a long period of time. The crematorium workers constitute a handful proportion of individuals who remain unnoticed for the work that they do. With the rise in death cases in the society, the work of the crematorium workers increased. However they remain underpaid for the work that they do. They are not provided with the basic health safety kits to protect themselves while cremating the infected bodies. This article aims to highlight the issues of the crematorium workers during the pandemic. Not much research is done on the plight of the crematorium workers as they often go unnoticed for the work that they perform in the society. It is time for governmental and community intervention for the upliftment of these vulnerable individuals who have been the victims of silenced oppressions for generations.*

**(Keywords:** *Pandemic, Ignored, Casteism, Upliftment*)

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### **I. INTRODUCTION:**

An individual's caste in a traditional Indian society determines his/her occupation. It is this ascribed status that differentiates one and another on the basis of purity and pollution. Cremating the dead is considered to be one of the lowliest occupations where individuals have to dispose of the dead in a manner prescribed by the religious order. In India, it is assumed that individuals from the untouchable community have to undertake this profession as it is a taboo for those who belong to the higher caste. Crematorium workers or cemetery workers usually constitute individuals from the marginalized and vulnerable community who undertake this job to support their family. The status of the crematorium workers continues to linger in the marginalized section with no source of support from the religious orders or communities. The crematorium workers are reprimanded for the work they do which includes no source of grief or remorse while burying the dead while struggling to be accepted in the mainstream society.

The course of pandemic has highlighted the real plight of the crematorium workers. With the advent of Covid-19 which has altered life and death, the crematorium workers are on their watch as the numbers of bodies of patients who have been tested positive have increased. Although the bodies of the patients are wrapped and the officials carrying the bodies to the grave use the necessary health measures, the crematorium workers are at a higher risk of contracting the virus by coming in close contact with the body while burying it. Even with the surge in death cases, the crematorium workers are not provided with protective gears nor have they been paid adequately for their service (Ravichandran, 2020).

The sense of satisfaction is an important factor that people hold with their occupation. It gives them acceptance and also monetary support for the amount of work that they do. In the context of the crematorium workers also known as cemetery workers, not much has been researched on the way they survive by burying the dead. People tend to shy away from the topic of death as it is an end of the living. The same attitude is associated with the final rites except that there is an understanding of moral obligation. Providing a decent funeral to the deceased may lead the dead to attain salvation. The funeral rites that different religious communities follow are at the behest of the religious dogmas. In the context of religion, Christianity and Islam

follow burial in the ground while Hinduism follows cremating the dead on a traditional wood pyre or electrical cremation. In the different customs that follow, the role of the crematorium worker is hidden by the religious patrons who initiate the funeral rites before cremating or burying the body. Once the rites are completed, the role of the crematorium workers begins which goes unnoticed in the social realm. As their work requires them to dispose the dead, the livings have no remorse towards them and consider them as outcasts in the society.

The pandemic has brought to light the most vulnerable phase of humanity. At one side it has proved there is no surety of life which is associated with pain and bereavement and on the other side it has highlighted the most inhumane side of the vulnerable communities. The marginalized groups who are often silenced because of their social ranking have been victims of the social, economic and political segregation in the society from the start and with the pandemic; their situation has worsened further. The cultural dogmas of the society have institutionalized the submissiveness of the marginalized which has further constricted their roles and opinions. The crematorium workers are one of the silenced individuals who have undertaken the task of cremating the dead at the fate of their own and their family's acceptance. There is an identity crisis among the crematorium workers as they are fighting the battle of social recognition not only from the hegemonic mainstream society, but also from their own members who feel that their employment is a disgrace to the whole family. The hands that bury the dead, in reality are dead within, courtesy of the social stigma labelled on their identity.

### **Their silence, echoed:**

Our emotions are based on the interactions we have with others. What we think of a person influences how we identify that person, and our identification influences our behaviour towards that person (Kearl, 1989). The concept of grief is associated with the interaction and the relation the individuals have with the deceased. It is therefore understood, that the pain of losing a person can be understood only by the person who has lost the person in their life. The symbolic potency of reviving or least restoring the memories of the deceased is through the cemeteries or burial grounds that account as a place designed to preserve the memories of the individuals. In a contemporary world, the ethos of death and bereavement have been reaffirmed and reconceptualised through the rites of passage and the cultural conception of time (Faunce, 1958). The exploration of feelings and emotions are restricted to the individuals who mourn the loss and not with the crematorium workers as it is assumed of their noble duty of burying the dead. This has in fact led to a transformation in the fear of death to the acceptance of mortalist hopes of people while altering their own existence among the living.

The rise in the number of death cases in the society is indeed a discomfoting notion. In the context of life and death, we prefer life as a gift in abundance. On the contrary, the crematorium workers find their source of livelihood through the death of a person. The number of burials provides them with the financial support on which they sustain. However the pandemic has further neglected the crematorium workers and their service to the society. Lack of medical kits and health measures have forced the crematorium workers to comply with the traditional way of digging the graves risking their life further. Moreover as per the regulations prescribed by health authorities, bodies of positive patients are not given to the family members but are wrapped and taken to the cemetery or the crematorium ground for the final rites. In the light of pandemic where social distancing is the norm, the crematorium workers have taken the initiative on the grounds of humanity and have continued to provide a dignified burial to the deceased while their family members are allowed to mourn from a distance (Reuters, 2020).

The plight of the crematorium workers continues to question the empathetic approach we hold towards the front line workers who are fighting to keep the city and its people safe. The difference remains that the officials are provided with the health kits and places to rest, while the crematorium workers have to resort to burial ground to sleep among the dead (Dhwani, 2021). Some of the crematorium workers in the city have lost the count of the bodies they had to cremate since the onset of the pandemic and the only thing that sustains them from the sympathy of the public and the stench of the bodies is alcohol (Shoshana, 2006). The number of death has affected the psychological wellbeing of the crematorium workers who are struggling for space at the cemetery to cremate the dead with the necessary precautions. The fear of coming in contact with the dead body will infect them and their family members entail them to work cautiously without any protective gear or tools. Most of the crematorium workers in the city remain unpaid from the initial stages of the pandemic outbreak. Not much support has been provided by the government towards the crematorium workers as they continue to survive in the dark.

The lack of support and empathy has not affected crematorium workers from doing their duty. Like other front line workers, the crematorium workers have been constantly helping the health authorities in disposing the dead bodies. Irrespective of their social standing in the society, the crematorium workers continue to provide their service to the community at the expense of being shunned and segregated. With the pandemic wiping out the source of income in most of the households, family members of the deceased have found it difficult to pay the crematorium workers and for the funeral rites. This however should not stop the government from reaching out the individuals who are putting their lives at risk every day and are recognized only when a

deceased needs burial or has to be cremated. A joint initiative with the government and health authorities to provide medical kits to the crematorium workers will help them to carry on their duty without any fear of getting infected. Providing them with basic housing with safe drinking water and sanitation will help them to lead a dignified life which they have been lacking for a considerable period of time.

## II. CONCLUSION

Although not much research is done on the crematorium workers, it is the need of an hour to include the situation of the crematorium workers in the mainstream society. The empathetic approach towards them can only sustain when the society will treat them and their employment with dignity and respect. The humanitarian lens that belittles and segregates them needs to change and has to be open and accepted towards these individuals as it will help in uplifting not only the crematorium workers but also their family members and community who continue to be ostracized for the task of disposing the dead. Until the situations of the crematorium workers improve, the struggle for their representation will continue to remain echoes of silence.

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