

“It has to be done only at night”: human waste disposal in Bangalore

C. Sharada Prasad and Isha Ray¹

India’s National Urban Sanitation Plan (NUSP, 2008) highlights the importance of latrine use, and also of “safe and proper disposal” for a sanitary city. It reports that over a third of India’s urban households rely on on-site (not sewer-borne) sanitation; this number is probably an underestimate. It recommends that cities work towards technological, financing and governance initiatives that would ensure safe fecal sludge and septage management, while recognizing that Indian cities are currently far from this goal. These and other documents put out by the Government of India give little indication of what mechanical (i.e. by truck and not by hand) sludge removal looks like, how cleaners live and work, and what therefore has to be modified or reformed as new policies are introduced. What, in other words, is taking place now, in the name of fecal sludge management? This Commentary describes an evening with septic tank cleaners and truck drivers in Bengaluru, India’s famed “Silicon Valley”. We present the piece in Sharada Prasad’s voice, as he recalls the evening.

Bengaluru, September 2014, 10:30 pm. “It has to be done only at night. The hotel does not want the neighbors or the guests to see this,” Santosh² says in a soft voice. “It is a large, posh hotel. We service it once every two months.” Santosh owns a truck in which fecal sludge is removed from septic tanks and transported away to a sewage treatment plant (ideally, if the owner has a permit) or to open drains and water bodies (commonly, as most owners do not have permits). He’s not the driver; this evening the driver is Deepak. I am riding with him.

Deepak is driving a yellow Tata 909 truck fitted with a large cylindrical tank at the back. The truck enters a residential area and the road narrows; it passes a bridge across an even narrower canal. The gate at the end of the road is the back entrance of the hotel.

The security guard opens the gate and lets the truck in. He points to a spot lit by the spilled-over light from the guard’s room, and Deepak maneuvers the truck to back it up. Even before the truck comes to a halt, two people jump out and start uncoiling the green PVC suction hose pipe hooked to the truck’s attached tank. “That short man in the green-and-white checkered shirt is Rajesh. That thinner person in the blue shirt is Prabhu” says Deepak. All three are from the Dalit (Maadiga / Madararu) community.

The location of the septic tank is dimly lit by a single incandescent bulb hanging from a braided red and yellow electric wire. We stand on top of what appears to be a concrete tank, which Deepak says is about 15 feet long, 10 feet wide, and 7 feet deep. It should take 6 to 8 trips to empty it all out.³

Rajesh and Prabhu approach the tank, dragging and uncoiling the pipe with bare hands. The flip-flops on their feet flap louder on the concrete roof of the septic tank than on the asphalt road that led to it. Rajesh

¹ Energy and Resources Group, University of California, Berkeley. Corresponding author: isharay@berkeley.edu

² The names of people and places have been changed to protect their privacy. All the conversations were in Kannada.

³ A trip is one truck load of fecal sludge hauled out of a location. A typical tank on a Tata 909 holds ~4000 liters of sludge.

opens the lid. From the look of the sludge and the strength of its smell, it's not too old. The tank is almost full. Fresh bubbles form and pop every few seconds on the surface of the turbid sludge. "People pay Rs. 10,000 per day to stay in this hotel, and their shit smells just like everybody else's" says Prabhu.

Rajesh connects the end of the pipe to the pump. Prabhu ties a five-foot long iron bar to the end of the pipe and submerges it into the sludge. The bar acts as a mixer. Prabhu's bony arms start rotating the bar in small circles and the sludge comes to life. The water is now dark and murky with suspended particles. The stench grows stronger. On Prabhu's signal, Deepak starts the pump. The roaring engine of the truck starts up the vacuum pump installed between the driver's cabin and the tank. The suction makes the pipe slither for few seconds, but the sludge soon loads into the empty pipe. The pump slurps the sludge, the level of the sludge in the septic tank drops by maybe 15 inches, and the tank fills up in 12 minutes. Deepak turns off the pump and gets into the driver's seat. I sit next to Deepak, and Rajesh squeezes in next to me. Prabhu is the last to enter. He closes the door; Deepak turns the truck towards the hotel gate. It is 11pm and we are out on the road, without washing hands, without any seat belts, with the first load of sludge.

The truck goes left towards a wide four-lane road. The traffic has almost completely died down. We cross two major intersections and stop on the side of the main road at a dimly lit part. It's in front of a commercial building under construction. Blue corrugated sheets cordon off the construction area. Right where we have stopped, the gutter connected to a culvert carries water to the other side of the street. Rajesh and Prabhu connect the PVC pipe to the draining end of the tank and open the valve. In eight minutes, gravity has emptied the tank. During those eight minutes, several vehicles pass the truck, whose tank has "Septic Tank Cleaning Service" written on it in large bright letters. Nobody stops to look or ask.

Prabhu and Rajesh work quickly to roll up the pipe and hang it back on the truck. They enter the driver's cabin, again without washing their hands. Prabhu takes out a shiny packet of *gutka*⁴ from his pocket, shakes it vigorously, tears it open and pours some onto Rajesh's right palm. Prabhu pops the rest into his mouth and throws the empty pack out of the window. Deepak takes out a bottle of whiskey hidden under his seat, takes a quick swig, closes the cap, and slides it over the dashboard. The bottle snuggles between the downward slope of the dashboard and the curve of the windshield, golden liquid bouncing. Deepak starts the truck and we head back to the hotel. The second load is quicker as the pipe is already laid out; within 15 minutes of arriving at the hotel the truck is on its way to unload the sludge.

Deepak has been doing this work for almost a year, Rajesh for three, but Prabhu has been at this job for almost five years now. Ask him, Deepak says, he has a lot of stories to tell you. He is an expert in finding great dumping spots. No, no, not an expert, says Prabhu: "I just get lucky, that's it". Prabhu's smile shows his *gutka*-stained teeth. "We are always on the lookout for spots to dump. The crucial part of this business is not in finding a customer to fill the tank, but finding a spot to unload it quickly. If we roam around Bangalore with a tank full of sludge, we lose money on other customer calls."

⁴ *Gutka* is a mix of tobacco, areca nuts, seeds, herbs, and spices (usually termed as *Pan masala*). It is chewed and placed between gum and cheek and the juice is sucked gradually. It produces a mild "buzz"

Deepak takes up the story. “When it rains, it’s easier. We find a road that is flooded. We park the truck on the side of the road, attach a shorter pipe to the drain valve and lower it just enough to submerge it, then we open the drain valve to let the sludge slowly mix with the flooding rainwater,” he says. If someone catches them? “Then we say, oh, the pipe must have fallen off the hook.” Don’t people notice the sludge coming out of the pipe? “No, not really,” says Rajesh, and Prabhu nods assent. “We only open the drain valve slightly. The rainwater in Bangalore is muddy and already mixed with sewage. And flooded roads have slow traffic, people are completely focused on driving.” A slight pause. Then Prabhu laughs. “Who has the patience in Bangalore to stop their vehicle in knee deep water, wade through sewage, come to us, and ask?” Another pause.

“When I was working for a previous truck operator, we emptied a septic tank in the morning and were driving through heavy traffic on the Ring Road. Two people on a motorcycle passed our truck and blocked it from the front. They got down and started banging on the driver’s door. All the vehicles behind us started honking. One of the guys asked the driver to get down. There was a policeman at the intersection and he did nothing till the guys pulled the driver out and started beating him up. The motorcyclists started shouting that we -- the children of whores (*soolemaklu*) -- had been careless and were spraying shit on everyone. We realized that our drain valve was not shut properly and the wind must have sprinkled the sludge on these bikers.” The police reprimanded Prabhu’s team, he says, but did not ask for a bribe. Too busy managing traffic.

In any case, “it’s not the traffic police, it is civil police who harass us” says Deepak. “It’s mostly if the public calls the police when they see us dumping somewhere⁵.” Deepak has pulled the truck to the side of the road; we are at the dumping site. Rajesh and Prabhu jump out and hurry to connect the pipe to unload the sludge into the gutter once more. “Once this building is open, we have to find another place to dump the waste” Rajesh says, opening the drain valve. Prabhu is holding the pipe into the gutter. It can be hard to find a discreet dumping spot. “I have also opened manhole covers in the center of the city and dumped the sludge there. It has to be done quickly though” Prabhu says, coiling up the pipe.

“Before you get into the truck, go and get some chicken rice and *pakora*.” Deepak is calling out from the driver’s seat, his hand extended out of the window, waving Rs.100. Rajesh collects the money, quickly turns his head to either side to check for traffic, and jumps over the concrete divider to the opposite side of the road.

It is now close to midnight. Most of the city is asleep but the other side of the road is bustling. Fluorescent lamps are mounted on bamboo poles, vendors have compact fluorescents dangling from the roofs of food stalls. Taxi- and rickshaw-drivers are getting hot food. Prabhu, Deepak and I stay inside the driver’s cabin as it’s chilly outside. Rajesh reappears. Chicken rice and *pakora* are wrapped in two separate banana leaf packets, and packed in a nicely folded Kannada newspaper sheet. He passes the *pakora* packet to Deepak and opens the chicken rice. The aroma of hot food engulfs the driver’s cabin. No one has washed his hands. I’m starving, too, but I don’t eat meat. The three men finish the rice and *pakora* within a few minutes, Deepak takes a swig of whiskey, Rajesh and Prabhu share a packet of *gutka*. They

⁵ The water utility, BWSSB, allows very few truck operators to dispose of sludge at two of its treatment plants. More than 90% of Bengaluru’s fecal sludge is dumped elsewhere.

start back to the hotel. “Friends in high school and my neighbors got me drinking” Deepak says. “Everyone I know drinks. I drink even when I don’t work.” Prabhu, too: “I had a small bottle of *sarayi*⁶ before I started tonight. But I only drink when I am home. I eat *gutka* when I work.” And Rajesh? “No, I don’t drink. I just eat *gutka*.”

The hotel guard moves towards the gate as soon as he sees the truck’s lights. Round three for the night. Rajesh and Prabhu work with the pipes as usual and Deepak controls the pump. This third trip is quick: 10 minutes to fill the tank, 12 minutes to reach the disposal site. While the sludge is draining, Rajesh and Prabhu pee into the gutter. Further down the road, there is a man selling hot tea, with a large thermos in one hand and a pile of stacked plastic cups in his other hand. I get four cups of tea. The tea is watery and loaded with sugar. I am worried that the hot liquid might melt our flimsy plastic cups.

More *gutka*, another golden swig, and we’re back at the hotel. I didn’t go on the side of the road so I need a toilet. The restaurant -- next to the septic tank – has nice restrooms, and I enter through the back door. It’s 2 am, but the housekeeping staff, security personnel, and others on the night shift are eating rice *pulao* and drinking tea. Three policemen are sitting together at one table. “They are serving hot tea and rice *pulao* inside” I tell Deepak, who is trying to gauge the quantity of the sludge inside the tank. “Yes, they do it every night for all the staff” Deepak responds. But we couldn’t have stopped for tea there. “We don’t get into the dining area and eat with other people when they know that we have come to empty the septic tank. But sometimes the security guard brings out tea for us.” Deepak moves around the truck to turn off the pump. He knows there are policemen eating inside. “The night-beat policemen eat here. They don’t have to pay. They never pay.”

The men are almost done with emptying the fourth load of sludge when a police jeep passes and stops a few meters ahead of us. A hand comes out of the window and beckons, and Deepak gets out and walks towards the jeep. Prabhu and Rajesh just continue doing what they were doing. In a couple of minutes Deepak is back, and Rajesh and Prabhu are coiling up the pipe. The police jeep has gone. What did the police say? “What else? Those people want their share. I told him that we still have more trips and we get paid only after we finish all the trips.” Rajesh and Prabhu get back in the truck. Deepak continues: “We know each other quite well. They are on their night beat. But by 5am they will be back at the police station where we pay them the *mamool*⁷ on our way back.”

It takes three more trips to completely empty the septic tank at the hotel, then it’s time to say goodbye. “Thank you for all your time and patience in helping me understand your work”. And Deepak replies: “You know, I am 23 years old now. You are the first older person from another community to call me *neevu*⁸. I am very happy. Thank you.” I don’t know what to say. I just put my palms together once more and take my leave.

⁶ Hard liquor sold by the state government.

⁷ *Mamool* means “the usual” in Kannada.

⁸ *Neevu* in Kannada is the formal ‘you’; in Hindi the equivalent would be *aap*. *Neenu* is its familiar version. Addressing someone as *neenu* – unless they really are familiar or very young – is a way of relegating them to their ‘proper’ position.